

Interfaith Dialogue in Islam

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We are living in an age of information – the age of the knowledge explosion. Today, everyone wants to know more and more about everything, including religion. The result is that, today, on the subject of religion, people are far better informed than ever before.

At the same time, we are living in a world of differences – of multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic societies. In an effort to eliminate differences, people fight amongst themselves, not realizing that differences cannot be removed. A certain reformer has rightly said that nature abhors uniformity. This means that ‘difference’ is a part of nature and it exists in every aspect of life including religion. What we need to do is simply learn the ‘art of difference management’, rather than the art of difference elimination. For, who has the power to remove differences?

How do we manage differences? It is through dialogue and discussion. Dialogue had no place in the monarchical system of ancient times as people used to take a confrontational course whenever differences arose. They only knew one way of settling disputes—and that was war. When the age of democracy set in, people, at both the political and non-political levels, began to engage freely in dialogue to take man out of the jungle-culture to the culture of peace. The aim of dialogue is to seek peaceful solutions to controversial matters, and it is what has brought humanity from the age of barbarism to the age of civilization.

We should also understand that difference is not a curse, but, rather, a blessing. History shows that difference of opinion leads to dialogue, and dialogue results in intellectual development, which is a boon for everyone concerned. Difference of opinion also leads to high thinking, which is the sole key to all kinds of human progress.

In the realm of religion, today, differences can be managed only through meaningful and positive ‘inter-faith dialogue’ between people of world religions, the aim of dialogue being to seek peaceful solutions to controversial matters in spite of differences. There may be

differences in religion and culture, but absolutely no difference or discrimination should be made between people in terms of respect and honour.

Dialogue, or peaceful negotiation, is the path prescribed by Islam. Islam is based on the principle of Dawah, which is another name for peaceful negotiation. The Prophet of Islam started his mission in 610 AD. This mission was to communicate his ideology to people by talking to them, listening to their objections and trying to convince them of his viewpoint by means of arguments. One of the initial Quranic verses revealed to him was that the ideology given by God to the Prophet should be spread by him among the people.[1] The Prophet's ideology was based on monotheism, whereas his Arab contemporaries believed in polytheism. It was but natural, therefore, that his mission should become subject to bilateral negotiation. He would communicate his point to people, listen to their responses and then give them further explanations. In this way, his mission became a practical demonstration of what we now term 'dialogue'. To make this dialogue fruitful, the Quran lays down certain meaningful guidelines:

“Say to the people of Book, come between us and you that we worship none but God.”[2]

We learn from this verse of the Quran what should be the subject of discussion when a conversation is being held between two parties. That is, the beginning of a dialogue should not be started with a controversy. Instead, a common ground should be sought on which the discussion should begin. The sequence of the discussion, therefore, should be from agreement to difference of opinion and then back to agreement.

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and goodl exhortation, and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious.”[3]

From this verse of the Quran we understand the method of dialogue. When dialogue takes place between two parties on a controversial subject, it is essential that an amicable atmosphere be maintained. If people belonging to both the parties set about arousing animosity and engaging in spreading antagonistic feelings, such an unfavorable atmosphere will be created that no fruitful dialogue can take place. Under such circumstances the method given in the Quran is that of 'wisdom and goodly exhortation'.

That dialogue is the successful way of putting one's point across can be seen from the following incident from the early history of Islam. It took place around 614-615 AD between

the Negus, the Christian King of Abyssinia, and Jafar ibn Abi Talib, one of the Prophet's Companions who had gone to Abyssinia for refuge from the persecution of the Quraysh opponents of Islam and the Prophet. On their emigration, the representatives of the Quraysh came seeking the extradition of the Muslims from the land. Addressing the Negus, one of the representatives of the Quraysh said, 'O king! A number of ignoble plebeians from Makkah have taken refuge in your country. They have apostatized from the religion of their people and have not joined your religion. They follow a new religion, known neither to us nor to you, which they created.'

The Negus sent for the Muslims and a dialogue took place between the King and Jafar. The King asked the Muslims, 'What is this new religion which caused you to separate yourselves from your people, a religion which is different from mine as well as from any other of the known religions?' At this, Jafar rose and gave a brief description of the teachings of Islam. The Negus asked him to recite some of the revelations which their Prophet claimed to have come to him from God. Jafar then recited to the Negus certain portions of the Quran. The Negus was moved on listening to the positive teachings of Islam and offered to protect the Muslims. As a result of this dialogue, Muslims found refuge in the country of the Negus.[4]

The tradition of the Prophet of Islam drawing up the Hudaibiya Peace Treaty gives another principle of dialogue. This treaty was signed only after long negotiations between the Prophet of Islam and the Quraysh. It is a matter of historical record that the conclusion of this treaty was possible because the Prophet unilaterally accepted the conditions laid down by the Quraysh.[5]

We learn from a number of examples throughout Islamic history that Islam not only lays down principles of dialogue but also gives practical demonstration of it.

In the Makkan period of his mission, the Prophet of Islam repeatedly put into practice the principle of dialogue. For instance, once the Quraysh sent their leader, Utba ibn Rabiyya, as their representative to the Prophet of Islam so that an atmosphere of peace might be arrived at through negotiation on the subject of mutual differences. The traditions tell us that Utba heard the Prophet out patiently and with full attention and then conveyed what he had said to the Quraysh.[6]

Similarly, at the invitation of his uncle, Abu Talib, representatives of the Quraysh gathered at the Prophet's home and held negotiations there peacefully on controversial matters.[7]

Again, in the presence of the Prophet of Islam, tripartite talks were held between representatives of three religions—Islam, Judaism and Christianity—in the Prophet's mosque in Madinah. This historic event, which took place in the sacred place of worship, shows the importance given to peaceful dialogue in Islam.

It becomes clear from the above discussion that the method of Islam is that of peaceful dialogue. The Quran tells us that the way of peace is the best way.[8]

There is a tradition to this effect: "Do not desire or seek confrontation with the enemy, but rather ask for peace from God." [9]

The objective of Islam is to bring about divine revolution; to invite people to the worship of God; to strive for a society in which spiritual, ethical, and human values are cherished. Islam advocates an atmosphere where peace, tolerance, love and well-wishing is the order of the day, an atmosphere where controversies are resolved without the use of violence. This is the desired goal of Islam, and such a goal can be achieved only through peaceful dialogue.

There is, therefore, an ever-increasing need to promote a better understanding of all major faiths, so that inter-religious harmony may prevail. Given our multi-religious world, rather than denigrate others' faiths, we must cultivate the transcendent genius of spirituality so that conflicting religious loyalties do not cause a disintegration of the socio-political framework of any nation or wrongly channelize national energies.

The basic truth about different religions needs to be emphasized, so that superficial interpretations of each other's scriptures may not be used, wittingly or unwittingly, to aggravate communal tensions. Scriptures should be read not to fault them, but to grasp their underlying spirituality. Religious traditions must be understood in depth. They must be lived in order to be known.

Moreover, we must avoid judging any Holy Book by the conduct of its adherents. Rather than judge the Quran or the Bible by what Muslims or Christians do, for instance, we should go by what their scriptures prescribe. The same should strictly apply to all other faiths.

Above all, we need to respond to each other's scriptures and communities with considerable tolerance. This formula is given in the Quran in these words: "For you your religion, for me mine".[10] That is people of all faiths must follow their religious beliefs, and, at the same time, they should respect others' beliefs. Thus, both parties can organize useful dialogue only by following this principle.

Muslim-Christian Dialogue

Since Christians and Muslims together make up more than half of the world's population, a viable relationship between them is obviously vital if there is to be meaningful peace in the world. In such a situation, Muslim-Christian unity is a sine qua non for building a better society, for no great task can be performed without joint effort. And, finding common ground between the two religious communities in order to maintain a stable equation is not just a matter of polite exchanges taking place on religious matters between selected leaders.

We find a number of similarities between Muslims and Christians —both belong to the same religious family, both are revealed religions, both have common ancestor—the Prophet Abraham. There are a number of such similarities as necessary for the formation of a conducive atmosphere for Muslim-Christian unity.

A study of the Quran shows that it attaches special importance to building good, cordial relations between Muslims and Christians. In the classical literature of Islam, there are many appreciative references to Christ and Christianity. The Quran calls Christ the 'Spirit of God' [11] and of Mary says: 'We breathed into her of our spirit, and made her and her son a Sign to all men.'[12]Of Christ and his followers, the Quran says: 'We gave Christ the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of his followers.'[13]

In another chapter, the Quran states: 'The nearest in affection to the Muslims are those who say: "We are Christians". That is because there are priests and monks among them; and because they are free from pride.'[14]

There is a Hadith report in the Sahih Muslim which demonstrates the early Muslims' positive evaluation of Christians.

Mustaurid, a companion of the Prophet, reported that the Prophet said: "The Day of Judgment will not come until the Christians outnumber all other people." Amr ibn al A's, a senior companion of the Prophet, endorsed this:

“You are indeed right. The Christians have four characteristics. They are the most forbearing in times of adversity; they do not allow their spirits to be broken, but promptly recover from every setback; they are the first to charge again after retreat; and they are the best of all in caring for the deprived, downtrodden and the weak. Amr then added that there is a fifth feature, which is the best of all. It is that they restrain their kings from perpetrating injustice and oppression.”[15]

Thus we find that gentleness and good behaviour provide a strong basis for unity.

In another verse of the Quran, Muslims have been commanded by God to follow the path of Christ’s followers. This verse is as follows: “O believers, be helpers of God, as said Jesus to his disciples ‘Who are, my helpers in the cause of God?’ The disciples said, ‘We are helpers of God.’”[16]

Now the question arises as to what steps should be taken for the betterment of society by the Muslims and the Christians. To my way of thinking, the first and foremost requirement is to provide opportunities to interact with one another repeatedly.

Another important issue is that of education. It is a known fact that education is the basis of all progress. I believe that Muslims and Christians ought to set up a target of 100% literacy and start working together. This joint effort will go a long way in harmonizing relationships between the two communities.

Another point in this regard is to highlight positive moral values common in both religions. The basic thing in this connection is to pave way for good relations between Christians and Muslims. Islam also has laid great stress on compassion and well-wishing. By avoiding theological differences, we must strive hard to build a common platform on the basis of common moral ground.

In Conclusion

It is abundantly clear from the above discussion that the method of Islam is that of peaceful dialogue. The Quran tells us that the way of peace is the best way (4:128). There is another verse, which tells us that the way of negotiation and arbitration should be adopted in controversial matters (4:35). The objective of Islam is to bring about divine revolution, to invite people to the worship of God, to strive for a society in which spiritual, ethical, and human values are cherished. Islam advocates an atmosphere where peace, tolerance, love and

well-wishing is the order of the day — an atmosphere where controversies are resolved without the use of violence. This can only take place through peaceful dialogue.

1. Quran 93:11
2. Quran 3:54
3. Quran 16:12
4. Rahman, Afzalur: The Encyclopedia of Seerah, Vol 8, Seerah Foudation, Lodon, 1982, p. 702-3.
5. Sell, Canon, Rev.: The Life of Muhammad, The Christian Literature Society for India, London, 1913, 180.
6. Ibid, 53.
7. Ibn Katheer, Muhammad, Tamir Abu As-Su'od (compiled and translated): Portrays from the Life of Prophet Muhammad, Dar Al-Manarah, Egypt, 2001, 18.
8. Quran 4:128
9. Al Bukhari: 2966, Sahih Muslim: 1741
10. Quran 11:11
11. Quran 4: 171
12. Quran 21: 91
13. Quran 57: 27
14. Quran 5:82-83
15. Sahih Muslim: 2898
16. Quran 61:14

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