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CULTURE OF DIALOGUE AMONG HUMAN SOCIETIES: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE[1]

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ABSTRACT

God, Almighty Exalted Be He, creates human beings and guides them in all their day today activities. The activities could be individual, social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and psychological. Knowing fully the predispositions of human beings, the All-knowing, the Omnipotent and Omniscient God made dialogue an ultimate tool for human society to come to terms in all ramifications of life. Dialogue plays a giant role in putting the human society in order, more than any other means adopted for achieving. Theories and practice examples have shown that any means adopted other than dialogue- if not preceded by dialogue-always fails; and at the end of the day dialogic means must be resorted to. Hence, the need for dialogue. Qur'an and Sunnah are full of instructions for dialogue as the best entity for putting human society in order. The use of dialogue in developing human spirituality in contemporary society is much needed now globally. At present, human societies are in disarray, mainly because of socio-cultural clashes which might be intra- and/or inter-societal. Qur'an (2:56, 5:48, 10:99, 16:125, 20:42-44, 49: 9, 49: 13, 60:8) talks on the role of dialogue-either directly or indirectly- for human application in day-to-day affairs. In this paper, I argue that dialogue is as old as the world itself; thus its inseparability from human societies and likewise its indispensability in all ramifications of human societies. The life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) is full of examples in that regards as contained in myriads of His traditions. Furthermore, it is argued that the successes recorded by pious predecessors in Islamic Annals, were majorly achieved through dialogue and not confrontation as deemed by some extremists because of their selfish desire.

KEYWORDS: *Dialogue, Human, Qur'an, Sunnah, Society, Culture.*

What is dialogue?

The root of the word dialogue (from the Greek *dialogos*, from *dia*, across, and *legein*, to speak) tells us that it is the effort to share meaning with someone. By intercultural or interfaith dialogue it means a conversation between different individuals or groups whose purpose is simply honest engagement to increase mutual understanding. This kind of dialogue can be differentiated from debate, where we seek to have an upper hand in an argument, to persuade others to agree with our point of view.

Dialogue is also different from discussion, which aims to solve a problem, reach a consensus or decide on a course of action. In dialogue we engage with others for the sake of engagement; we are looking simply for meaningful human interaction through which we may grow in the understanding of the other, of ourselves and of the relationship between us.

Various philosophers and social scientists have reflected on dialogue, and offered their own detailed ideas and theories about it.

The twentieth-century philosopher Martin Buber[2] saw true dialogue as a kind of interaction that provides understanding through direct experience of the other. He saw it as a genuine, transformative encounter between the participants seeing and responding to each other as persons, not as 'things' that they might use as means to an end. For Buber, dialogue is a deeply meaningful interpersonal experience which can change you, as it can help you see yourself from the perspective of the other.

David Yankelovich, whose book *The Magic of Dialogue*[3] explores dialogue's potential to transform conflict into co-operation, describes dialogue as a conversation under three particular conditions:

- Equality (or at least suspension, as far as humanly possible, of inequality and coercive influences);
- Listening with empathy in order to understand,
- Bringing assumptions out into the open.

Dialogue is often associated with particular social goals, such as improving relations between different groups or even helping to resolve conflicts. But we hold that the primary reason for engaging in dialogue is that it is inherently valuable.

Dialogue is a good in itself, quite apart from any social or other goods that may flow from it. Dialogue is a natural manifestation of our humanness, as both the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet (pbuh) make it clear. The Qur'an tells us that the fundamental oneness of all human beings and their ethnic and linguistic plurality together enable us to engage with and understand one another: "People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another..." (al-Hujurat, 49:13)

Accounts of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) life show that he was a model of positive engagement with those around him before he was even sent as a prophet, since before that time he was known as al-Sadiq al-Amin, 'the truthful and the trustworthy.' Thus at that time he positively engaged with others not in obedience to the revealed word of God (Qur'an) but in obedience to the norms of God's creation – the innate disposition (fitra) with which God endowed all human beings. As Fethullah Gülen says, we must consider ourselves human first from the point of view of our nature and responsibilities, before we consider our belonging to a religious or cultural tradition. Our fundamental God-given human disposition turns us towards positive engagement with other human beings; it turns us towards dialogue. This is underlined by various peculiarities of our biological and spiritual make-up. The striking concentration of over fifty muscles in the human face gives us scope for subtle and effective communication through facial expressions before we even use any words. We also find in ourselves, if we are open to this element of our human make-up, a great capacity for communication with God and with others at a profound spiritual level.

The inherent value of dialogue becomes clearer when we recognize that the creation is intelligible, enabling and requiring us to be responsive to it, to engage with it materially, intellectually and spiritually. God created intelligent beings to seek Him and respond to Him. While angels share this role, human beings are in the unique position of having free choice; we can freely choose to worship and obey our Creator and so can engage with Him in a unique way. God's will that human beings seek Him and respond to His creation and His will is indicated by the appearance of thousands of prophets and messengers over the course of human history. In addition, through select messengers He sent books explaining His will and the human role in His creation. Further, God's creative action is continuous and ongoing; through the events which he brings about in the created world He engages with, teaches and communicates with us. And He calls us to respond actively and regularly through prayer and service; this is our God-appointed purpose: I created jinn and mankind only to worship Me. (al-Dhariyat, 51:56)

Worship itself is a form of dialogue with God. What is more, worshiping God requires us to know God, within the narrow limits of our human capacities. Knowing God requires exploration, contemplation and enquiry. This makes it necessary for us to engage with the world and with others, to see the hand of the Creator in the created. As such, we are made for dialogue with God as well as with each other.

What dialogue aims to achieve?

Considering the practice of dialogue from a Muslim's perspective, the first question we should ask is whether or not it is necessitated by religion. The answer to that question lies in three primary sources: the word of God in the Qur'an, the example of the Prophet (pbuh) and the norms of God's creation (Sunnatullah). On all counts we affirm that dialogue is a religious duty for Muslims. Once it has been established that religion requires dialogue, we can consider the secondary question of its effects. What does dialogue achieve? There are a number of valuable benefits. If we agree that dialogue is a religious requirement then dialogue contributes to the fulfilment of our religion. If we agree that dialogue is a

natural expression of our innate human disposition (fitra), then dialogue enriches our experience as human beings. Dialogue can enhance our understanding of ourselves because, by contextualising ourselves among others who are different, we see our own beliefs, values and identities more clearly. If we lay a coloured shape on a background of a different, contrasting colour, it stands out much more clearly. In the same way, when we explore our own beliefs and values in the context of different ones, we see more clearly what is distinctive in our own identity, as well as learning to appreciate what is distinctive about others. Far from threatening or undermining our religious identity, dialogue can affirm it and bring us a more profound appreciation of our own faith in all its uniqueness and beauty. Further, by helping others to better understand who we are and what we stand for, we challenge stereotypes, correct misconceptions and reduce prejudice. In turn we gain understanding of the beliefs and values of those others, which may correct mistakes in our perceptions of them. A great deal of the tension and distrust that sometimes exists between different groups is based on misunderstanding and can be successfully reduced or eliminated through the understanding which dialogue can bring about. Thus dialogue can contribute to stable, peaceful relations between different groups, which is a religious objective apart from anything else.

In addition, dialogue can enable us to explore together solutions to all kinds of shared problems. Today we face global problems such as moral degeneration, environmental pollution, unfair distribution of economic gains, disease, poverty, collapse of family values, fanaticism in the name of race, religion and nationalism, and problems threatening world peace such as terrorism, war and exploitation. Religions and their adherents can contribute to the solutions of these problems, especially when interfaith relations are strong and different groups can trust each other and work together harmoniously. Interfaith and intercultural dialogue helps to make such trust possible.

What does the Qur'an say about dialogue?

Activities in the name of religion should naturally abide by the commands and prohibitions of religion. For Muslims as a whole the Qur'an is the first primary source for doctrine and norms, a source that is never mistaken and never misguides. Therefore no idea or movement that is not or cannot be endorsed by the Qur'an – no matter when, where, how, why and by whom the ideas or movements are followed – will ever be accepted and welcomed by Muslims as a whole. The Qur'an's position on interfaith and intercultural dialogue is not immediately clear when we consider all the verses which seem to have a bearing on the issue. There are many verses which require explanation, either because of our ignorance or because they need to be clarified by qualified experts in line with the established methods of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) that take account of the ways very specific to the Qur'an in which non-Muslims are referred to. The opponents of interfaith dialogue appeal to a number of verses in support of their position, including those concerning whether or not Jews and Christians are People of the Book, those that command that unbelievers be killed, and those that instruct that Jews and Christians should not be taken as 'friends'. Jihad (especially in the its narrowest sense of struggle with groups engaged in active hostilities against the Muslims and Islam) and various practices in Islamic history have also been used to argue that dialogue is un-Islamic. The verses cited by these opponents of dialogue have to do with regulating the relations of Muslim individuals and societies with People of the Book and with polytheists (mushrikuns). When we analyse the verses revealed during the Mecca and Medina periods as a whole, we find a nuanced system of classification of non-Muslim groups. These groups include the hypocrites who pretended to be with the Muslims (munafiqs) and the polytheists (mushrikuns), who conspired together against the Muslim society and sought to ruin its political, religious and military relations with non-Muslim groups like the Jews and Christians. It is important to be clear about which verses regulate relations with which kind of group. It is also important to consider which circumstances are regulated by which verses. Some of the verses in question set out rules of conduct towards non-Muslims appropriate during actual hostilities, while others regulate relations with non-Muslims in times of peace. Still others regulate very specific, extraordinary circumstances.

Included here are the verses that encourage Muslims to engage in dialogue with others. The following are a few examples of these verses:

People, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware. (al-Hujurat, 49:13)

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about. (al-Ma'ida, 5:48)

[Believers], argue only in the best way with the People of the Book, except with those of them who act unjustly. Say, 'We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God is one [and the same]; we are devoted to Him.' (al-'Ankabut, 29:46)

Which verses command dialogue with People of the Book?

There are many verses in the Qur'an on the issue of dialogue with People of the Book:

Say, 'People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords.' (al- 'Imran, 3:64)

The Basis from the Prophet's Life:-

The Prophet (pbuh) is the communicator and interpreter of the Qur'an. His Sunnah is the essential resource without which the Qur'an could not be understood correctly. The Sunnah is the second main source of Islam after the Qur'an. Like the Qur'an it is binding upon all the Muslims, and they need to refer to it, alongside the Qur'an, until the end of time. The Prophet's (pbuh) life was spent in dialogue with atheists, idolaters and People of the Book. Treaties, friendly relations and commercial partnerships are all facets of this dialogue. His examples, in this area as in every other, are precious treasures for Muslims, who accept him as a model and a guide.

The Prophet (pbuh) recognised justice and honour in non-Muslim groups and individuals and entered into friendly relationships with those who displayed these qualities. The Muslims suffered severe persecution and torment at the hands of Meccan idolaters in the early period of Islam. The Prophet (pbuh) suggested to those who wanted to escape this persecution, which could amount to murder when Muslims refused to convert back to their ancestors' religion that they should temporarily migrate to Abyssinia. The Prophet (pbuh) explained his preference for Abyssinia as follows: 'There is a king who loves justice and in whose territories nobody is oppressed.[4]

The king (Najashi) that the Prophet (pbuh) described as one who did not persecute, Ashama ibn Abjar, was a Christian.

The Prophet (pbuh) entered into trade relationships with People of the Book. At the time of his death, a person of Medina belonging to the Jewish faith was in possession of a shield belonging to the Prophet (pbuh), which he had given as surety for a debt.[5]

This shows that the Jewish people in Medina traded freely with their Muslim neighbours, and that the Prophet himself (pbuh) traded with his Jewish neighbours. Further, he actively protected the rights and freedom of People of the Book, honoured those beliefs and traditions that he shared with them, and treated them with courtesy and respect. He visited the religious schools of the Jews (Beit Midrash) from time to time to ensure that there were no restrictions on their freedom to learn and teach their religion.[6]

When a delegation of Christians from Najran came to negotiate a pact with the Prophet (pbuh), he courteously allowed them to pray in the mosque which lasted the whole day[7].

These few examples show that our Prophet (pbuh) accepted non-Muslims from the beginning, and sought to enter into relations with them in the context of an environment of freedom of religion, a pluralist society, and a search for common ground. He never discriminated among people on the basis of their religious identities. Any historical instance of such discrimination is the result of continuous animosity and attacks against Muslims by particular individuals. Otherwise, neither people belonging to the Christian or Jewish faith nor polytheists faced any discrimination. They were able to live in harmony under the Medina Charter.

Events or Treaties from Muslim History That Lend Support to Dialogue:-

There are many agreements and practices through which non-Muslims were accepted with their own religious and cultural values and enabled to live a comfortable life on Muslim lands during the reign of the Four Righteous Caliphs and of the Umayyads, Abbasids, Seljuks and Ottomans. Such practices, followed in states of war as in states of peace, earned the appreciation, admiration and astonishment of others. Below are few examples in respect to that:

Upon his arrival at Jerusalem after the conquest to receive the keys to the city, Caliph 'Umar refused the invitation to pray in the Ba'th (Qiyamah) church or the Constantine church next to it. He was concerned that future generations might turn the churches into mosques to commemorate his prayer[8].

An excerpt from the agreement that Caliph 'Umar signed with the people of Aylah: 'This is an assurance of peace and protection given by the servant of Allah, Omar, Commander of the Believers, to the people of Ilia' (Jerusalem). He gave them an assurance of protection for their lives, property, church and crosses as well as the sick and healthy and all their religious community. Their

churches shall not be occupied, demolished nor taken away wholly or in part. None of their crosses nor property shall be seized. They shall not be coerced in their religion nor shall any of them be injured.

When 'Umar saw a poor old dhimmi [person subject to a dhimma – treaty of protection] who was begging on the street to make a living, he said, 'We cannot leave you alone in your old age when we collected jizya [poll tax levied on dhimmis] from you in your youth.' He allocated a pension to needy dhimmis from the state's treasury[9]

He also ordered that his successors also protect the rights of the dhimmis[10]

This approach embodies Islam's respect and concern for all people on the basis of their humanity, regardless of religion. This attitude requires Islamic states to deal with all citizens according to principles of social justice.

CONCLUSION

The diversity of humanity is surely another sign. It guides us towards engagement with people different from ourselves. This ayah (sign) in creation is underlined by ayat (verses) in the Qur'an highlighting diversity and indicating the appropriate response to it, as in al-Hujurat, 49:13: People, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.

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Dr. Ahmed Sebihi has started his professional career as a Chief Editor in Algerian weekly newspapers "AL SAMURAH" and "AL AQEEDAH" before moving to Tunisia to work as a correspondent with "RUSSIKADIA" Newspaper. He then relocated to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to assume the role of Director of Media Center and Public Relations in the High Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina under the patronage of H.H. King Fahed Ibn Abdul Aziz, May his Soul rest in Peace.

Actually working in the American University in the Emirates (AUE) for almost 5 years and before that in the Canadian University of Dubai (CUD), Gulf Medical University of Ajman (GMU), the University of Sharjah (UOS), Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU), Ajman University of Sciences and Technology Network (AUST), University College for Mother and Family Sciences (UCMFS), Ahmed Sebihi has developed a great deal of educational, learning and teaching skills throughout his long enriching experience. He has led a range of workshops for teachers and students in Thailand and in the UAE and has many contributions in all levels of the educational scale in Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Malaysia, the Kingdom of Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates.

In Thailand, Ahmed Sebihi has been discerned the award of the "Best Teacher" by the Institute of Islamic Saiburi under the Islamic Foundation for Education. He also supervised the Arabic and Islamic Studies Curriculum for South of Thailand Schools.

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In the UAE, Ahmed Sebihi has been involved in many activities to serve the Community, among which his participation to a live discussion on major issues in the Muslim Community with a local Quranic Radio Channel" 846 KHZ.; a series of workshops in Sharjah and Ajman: "The Psychology of Marriage Co-partnership"; " ULFA Program"; "How to succeed in your Marriage"; " How to excel your Studies"; " How to Plan Ones Future "; " Class Management".

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