

Interfaith Dialogue in Islam: A Scriptural Scrutiny

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Abstract: *With a war-ridden world in dire straits caused either by incontinence of religious extremists or by manipulation of credulous religionists by the quarters of vested interests, when the religious, peace-loving people had been ardently striving to ferret out any way and awaiting God's blessings, interfaith dialogue surfaced as an emblem of peace, voicing a clarion-call for fraternal relation among the adherents of differing religions and as a guide-post to evade inter-conflict. It is a dialogic endeavor of the followers of different religions especially on a scholarly level to recognize and stress common phenomena in various religions in a bid to proceed towards the common goal of communal harmony. But in treading the rugged path of dialogue and paving the way of friendship, the dialoguers may any time stumble and, in a sheer effort for harmonization, may slide into adopting any unjust means not ratified by their religions. For instance, a dialoguer cannot go for any compromise on fundamentals or opt for syncretism and universal religion. Nor can he engage in a dialogue that creates indifference to his religion. Only a set of distinct guidelines can protect the dialoguers. Islam as a complete code of life has not left this field unexplored. Islamic directives in this regard, therefore, are very clear. This article has been designed to go through the Quran and the Prophet's way of life in order to clarify how Islam views interfaith dialogue and also to warn of various hazards to be guarded against while in dialogue.*

Keywords: *Interfaith, Dialogue, Islam, Scripture, Scrutiny, Quran, Inter-religious*

I. Introduction

Any effort initiated to awaken mutual understanding among the people of differing faiths on the basis of common grounds in world religions is called interfaith dialogue. It is a symbol of fraternity and a harbinger of world peace and harmony. The religionists are now striving to put an end to war and clash among themselves. Like the Christians, the Muslims have also considered it a noble job and came forward to work for world peace. This is because Allah enjoined the Muslims to call upon the people of other religions for inter-religious dialogue.¹

Propelled by the Quranic injunctions, the Muslims today have been conducting many programs of interfaith dialogue throughout the world. But they ought to proceed very cautiously and carefully since Islam did not speak of any unconditional dialogue that the Muslims can enjoy the right to seek for harmony even at the cost of compromise on fundamental beliefs of Islam. Thus, the impending article should expose to the readers pure concept of interfaith dialogue in Islam and help the dialoguers to render dialogues fruitful and successful.

II. Meaning Of Interfaith Dialogue

The phrase 'interfaith dialogue' consists of two words: 'interfaith' (adjective) and 'dialogue' (noun). The word 'dialogue' has its origin² in the Middle English 'dialoge', from Old French 'dialogue', from Latin 'dialogus', from Greek 'dialogos', from 'dialegethai' meaning 'to converse with' ('dia' for 'through' and 'legein' for 'speak'). It denotes to:³

1. Conversation between two or more people as a feature of a book, play, or film;
2. Discussion directed towards explanation of a subject or resolution of a problem;
3. An exchange of opinions on a particular subject.⁴

Some people mistakenly define dialogue as conversation between two persons alone from the confusion of 'dia' and 'di'. On the other hand, 'Interfaith' means 'inter-religious', as opposed to intra-religious and extra-religious. Hence interfaith dialogues are neither intra-faith dialogues that take place 'between or among various sects of the same religion nor non-religious dialogues like theists-atheists ones.

The term 'interfaith dialogue', thus, refers to cooperative and positive interaction among people of different religious traditions and spiritual beliefs at both individual and institutional levels with the aim of

¹“Say (O Muhammad Sm.): O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah (Alone), and that we associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall take others as lords besides Allah.....” Surah Ali Imran, V. 3:64

² Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary, 2002.

³ Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2008.

⁴ Collins English Dictionary, 10th ed., 2009

deriving a common ground in beliefs, concentrating on similarities between faiths, understanding of values and commitment to the world. It is distinct from syncretism which moves to synthesize different religions with a view to forming a new common faith i.e. one universal religion. Francis Cardinal Arinze defines interfaith dialogue in the following words:

“Interreligious dialogue is a meeting of heart and mind between followers of various religions. It is communication between two believers at religious level. It is a walking together towards truth and a working together in projects of common concern.”⁵

This view of interfaith dialogue is echoed by the Holy Quran as well. Allah says:

"And argue not argue with the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), unless it be in (a way) that is better ...; and say (to them): “We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you and our Ilah (God) and your Ilah (God) is One (i.e. Allah), and to Him do we have submitted (as Muslims)”⁶

The most common form of inter-religious discussion is constituted when two individuals, be they friends, neighbors or acquaintances, discuss their religious beliefs in a casual sitting. These discussions can be very valuable in promoting better understanding in them. However, the formal form of interfaith dialogue takes place when authoritative members of at least two religious communities come together for an extended and serious discussion of the beliefs and practices that separate them. The religious experts here exchange information on their beliefs and practices, and seek mutual understanding

Interfaith dialogue may be held in different forms⁷ in line with the need of time and situation. Major forms of interfaith dialogue are dialogue of life, dialogue of co-activities, dialogue of discourse on national issues, theological dialogue and scriptural dialogue like the reading of the Holy Books together. When we generally speak of interfaith dialogue, we mean theological dialogue. And this is what this write-up stands for.

III. Islamic Perspective Of Interfaith Dialogue

Islam came up with two types of directives as regards interfaith dialogue: one, approval of interfaith dialogue; and the other, rejection of it. In its assent to inter-religious dialogue, Islam calls upon the Muslims to promote interfaith dialogue. In contrast with this confirmation, Islam also stipulated a number of conditions. These rules and regulations urge us to desist from such dialogues that may derail us.

3.1. APPROVAL OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

This segment has been set to demonstrate the scriptural basis of interfaith dialogue in Islam along with its theological back-up for this sort of dialogue. The discussion came to conclusion with a reconciliatory discourse of the belief of dominant Islam and pluralistic Islam.

3.1.1. Scriptural Basis of Interfaith Dialogue

If we explore the Holy Quran, we find many verses which may be regarded as authoritative guidelines for interfaith dialogue. These very verses urge the Muslims to confirm the monotheistic faiths that preceded Islam. The Qur’an attests the Holy Scriptures that came before it including the Torah and the Gospel. Allah says in the Holy Quran:

“Say (O Muslims), “We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Ibrahim (Abraham), Ismail (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), Yaqub (Jacob), and to Al-Asbat (the offspring of the twelve sons of Jacob, and that which has been given to Musa (Moses) and Isa (Jesus), and that which has been given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have submitted (in Islam)”⁸

Islam as par its categorical instructions maintains no hesitation in resorting to interfaith dialogue for the sake of world peace. Perhaps, no other scriptures, at least among the revealed ones, did articulate for interfaith dialogue as plainly as the Quran did. Allah says:

Say (O Muhammad Sm.): “O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah (Alone), and that we associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall take others as lords besides Allah...”⁹

⁵ Cardinal Francis Arinze, *The Church In Dialogue: Walking with Other Believers*, 1990, p.162.

⁶ Surah Al-Ankabut, V. 29:46.

⁷ For greater understanding, see: Md. Sanullah, *The Problems and Prospects of Interfaith Dialogue Bangladesh Perspective*, 2012.

pp.39-41; Theotonius Gomes, “Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue among Peoples: Spiritual Dimensions of Dialogue”, *Shomprii Ridoe Ane Shanti* (Harmony brings peace in heart), 2011, pp. 57-58.

⁸ Surah Al-Baqarah, V. 2:136.

⁹ Surah Ali Imran, V. 3:64.

This Verse represents the most manifest call for interfaith dialogue. Islamic approach to interfaith dialogue and its attestation is primarily based on this very verse.

Apart from the Quranic call for interreligious dialogue, we also find specimens of religious dialogue from the life-stories of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. The Charter of Madinah set for the citizens of Madinah city state and the Treaty of Hudaibiyah made with the people of Makkah are two important documents that testify for their dialogic life. In Madinah, all people irrespective of religions had equal rights¹⁰ and enjoyed happy, peaceful life verily under the jurisdiction of the Charter of Madinah. On the other hand, Prophet Muhammad (Sm.) abandoned the title "Rasulullah" (Allah's Messenger) while writing the Treaty of Hudaibiyah (with the disbelieving people of Makkah) only for the sake of peace and harmony.¹¹

The following are some of the verses that direct us to interfaith dialogue:

a) "There is no compulsion in religion: Verily the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in Tagut and believes in Allah, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allah is All-Hearer, All-Knower."¹²

b) "Say (O Muhammad Sm.) to the believers to forgive those who (harm them and) hope not for the Days of Allah (i.e. His Recompense), that He may recompense a people, according to what they have earned".¹³

c) "And insult not those whom they (disbelievers) worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge."¹⁴

These Verses obviously claim that Islam not only approves interfaith dialogue for its adherents but also earnestly urge the peoples of other religions to come forward for the sake of peace and tranquility and engage in inter-religious dialogue.

3.1.2. Theological Concern

By courtesy of categorical verses of the Quran, Islamic theology does not find any difficulty in accommodating interfaith dialogue in it. Nor does Islamic theology need any further indirect interpretation to confirm interfaith dialogue as is done by the experts of many a religion. In fact, Islamic scripture and theology both converged on the point of interfaith dialogue. Hence theologically Islam is fully supportive to interfaith dialogue.

But the Muslims are not so advanced in this field because of worldwide oppression, depression and deprivation that the anti-Islamist world has inflicted upon the Muslims mentionable in Iraq, Afghanistan etc. in lead of Christendom. Whereas Allah profusely lauded the Christians and their priests of being humble, modest and soft-hearted. Allah says: "... , 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."¹⁵ The Muslims are persecuted in one locality and are called for interfaith dialogue in the other. It has generated a distrust and suspicion in the Muslims' minds against the opponents' sincerity in the call for interfaith dialogue.

3.1.3. Dominant Islam and Pluralistic Islam

Islam is a missionary religion. Great rewards have been promised for encouraging self-willed conversion. The Muslims are inspired to participate in missionary activities.¹⁶ Allah says in the Quran: "It is He Who has sent His Messenger Muhammad (Sm.) with guidance and the religion of truth (Islam), to make it superior over all religions"¹⁷ The same Verse has been mentioned in the Quran twice. The missionary zeal and the instructions of the verses press us to prefer missionary activities to interfaith dialogue.

The missionary zeal results from the belief in dominant Islam that is superiority of Islam to other religions. On the contrary, the dialogic interests originate from the belief in pluralistic Islam i.e. plurality of religions or pluralism, which is also championed by Islam.¹⁸ One wonders how we could reconcile between these two contradictory positions when both dialogue and missionary work are considered noble businesses in Islam and it is incumbent on the Muslims to carry out them both. In fact, this contradiction between two polar

¹⁰ Allama Safiur Rahman Mobarakpuri, *Ar-Rahiqul Maktum*, 1999, pp. 212-217.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.380.

¹² Surah Al-Baqarah, V. 2:256.

¹³ Surah Al-Jathiyah, V. 45:14.

¹⁴ Surah Al-Anam, V. 6:108.

¹⁵ Surah Al-Maidah, V. 5:82.

¹⁶ "Invite (mankind, O Muhammad Sm.) to the Way of your Lord (i.e. Islam) with wisdom (i.e. with the Divine Revelation and the Quran) and fair-preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better...." Surah An-Nahl, V. 16: 125;

¹⁷ "And who is better in speech than he who (...) invites (men) to Allah (Islamic monotheism) and does righteous deeds and says I am one of the Muslims." Surah Fussilat, V. 41:33.

¹⁸ Surah At-Tawbah, V. 9:33; Surah As-Saf, 61:9.

¹⁹ "There is no compulsion in religion: Verily the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in Tagut and believes in Allah, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allah is All-Hearer, All-Knower.hears." Surah Al-Baqarah, V. 2:256;

²⁰ "And insult not those whom they (disbelievers) worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge." Surah Al-Anam, V. 6:108;

²¹ "Say (O Muhammad Sm.) to the believers to forgive those who (harm them and) hope not for the Days of Allah(i.e. His Recompense), that He may recompense a people, according to what they have earned". Surah Al-Jathiyah, V. 45:14;

²² "...; and say (to them): "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you and our Ilah (God) and your Ilah (God) is One (i.e. Allah), and to Him do we have submitted (as Muslims)." Surah Al-Ankabut, V. 29:46;

²³ "...We make no distinction between any of them (*prophets*), and to Him we have submitted (in Islam)." Surah Al-Baqarah, V. 2:136

positions is not a problem at all, since, for engaging in missionary work, it is not essential to leave the other. Nor is it obligatory to quit missionary zeal for the sake of dialogue. The reality is, we have no alternative to introducing separate organizations for distinct motives, as both interfaith dialogue and missionary work are two independent organs of Islam

3.2. DISAPPROVAL OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

The afore-mentioned positive approach of Islam towards interfaith dialogue should not imply that interfaith dialogue enjoys an absolute nodding of Islam. Never, it has rather issued a conditional permission for dialogue, because interfaith dialogue is a perilous task. Its alleys are fraught with dangers. So Islam totally discards interfaith dialogue if it is potential of us to fail in escaping the attendant risks and regrettably fall prey to consequent disasters. The ensuing part hopefully will clarify the matter.

3.2.1. The Wrong Inter-religious Dialogue

Interfaith organizations sometimes hold some such dialogues as are based on the polite assumption that every religion has a little truth in line with the similitude of blind mice exploring an elephant. The parable goes like this: the first mouse feels the elephant's ear and proclaims, "It's like a giant leaf!" The second touches the leg, and says, "No, it's more like a tree!" The third comes into contact with the trunk and is certain that it's more like a huge snake. The analogy to this parable suggests that inter-religious dialogue is a dialogue between different good people who have partial truths. Islam regards these types of dialogues as totally rubbish, because Islam is a complete religion. It is not a partial truth; it is the complete and ultimate truth. Allah says: "... I have perfected your religion for you, completed My Favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion..."¹⁹

3.2.2. Compromise

The Muslims will participate in dialogues to testify to their own religion uncompromisingly. Reconciliation is not above witness. Hence the variety of backgrounds should not allow them to lose the identity of their faith and principles. We all want harmony, but at what cost? No prophets compromised on the fundamentals of their teachings. Jesus never compromised on the gospel. He said: "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters."²⁰ In the Quran, Allah says: "They wish that you should compromise (in religion out of courtesy) with them: so they (too) would comprise with you."²¹

The Muslims not having vast religious knowledge should not take part in interfaith dialogues because when a Muslim of weak belief finds his beliefs questioned and does not have any satisfactory answer to this, he feels inferiority of his faith, which results in the change of his heart and proceeds to conversion.

3.2.3. Barrier for Missionary Work:

If interfaith dialogue discourages missionary work and places apathy on the dialoguer's mind to da'wah (calling) to the path of Allah, we should say goodbye to such dialogues. Islam is a missionary religion. Proclamation is the heart of this religion. The Holy Quran encouraged the followers to disseminate religious values to others and declared a great deal of reward for those who have dedicated themselves to the propagation of their religions.²²

We may solve the problems otherwise by establishing different organization for different purposes: organization for interfaith dialogue and organization for missionary activities. We cannot accept the one and reject the other. Allah says, "... Then do you believe in a part of the Scripture and reject the rest? ..." ²³

3.2.4. Syncretism

Syncretism, technically, refers to the amalgamation of different religions, philosophies or ideas. In linguistics, it refers to the mixing of different forms of the same word during the development of a language.²⁴ In interfaith dialogue, syncretism is meant by the illegitimate assimilation of different religious elements. Many participants who know neither dialogue nor religions misrepresent dialogue, arguing that syncretism is an essential component of successful dialogue. But we should know that the goal of interfaith dialogue is not to come to an agreement out of contradictory doctrines; rather the goal is to find out the common grounds that already exist in various religions. Islam totally discards syncretism, as it says in the Holy Quran, "And mix not truth with falsehood, nor conceal the truth (...) while you know (the truth)."²⁵

¹⁹ Surah Al-Maidah, V. 5:3.

²⁰ *New American Standard Bible (NASB)*, Matthew, 12:30

²¹ Surah Al-Qalam, V. 68:9.

²² See reference No: 16

²³ Surah Al-Baqarah, V. 2:85.

²⁴ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7th ed, 2005

²⁵ Surah Al-Baqarah, V. 2: 42

3.2.5. Bad Attempt at Likening All Religions

In comparing all religions to one another, many dialoguers ignore the least existence of any difference among religions in guiding to the right path. They illustrate that all religions will lead the adherents to Najat or salvation as all tracks leading to the peak of a mountain guide the climbers to it. They hope that by doing so all people will be unified, social solidarity will prevail there and interfaith dialogue will be successful. In fact, this is a perverted attempt which is diametrically opposite to the aims and objectives of interfaith dialogue and is unacceptable to Allah. The Quran says, “Truly, the religion with Allah is Islam...”²⁶ Allah also avers: “And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be acceptable of him...”²⁷

3.2.6. Fear of Losing Confidence in One’s Own Faith

With poor performance of the co-religionists and weak organizational structure, any participant or even dialoguer himself may lose confidence in his faith in submission to convincing theological arguments and explanations. We must desist from such imbalanced and unequal dialogues to keep the commoners unassailable. Allah says in the Quran, “(This is) the truth from your Lord. So be you not one of those who doubt.”²⁸ Therefore, a theological dialogue should take place among the religious scholars who possess prodigious knowledge and resolution of faith. Allah criticizes the suspicious people in His words, “Do they seek other than the religion of Allah (...), while to Him submitted all creatures...?”²⁹

3.2.7. Universal Religion

The belief that all religions are true results in a concomitant belief of universal religion. People of this belief prefer to mingle the fundamentals of all religions in order to form a new universal religion that would be acceptable (?) to all. This is a syncretistic belief. The lack of respect and commitment to one’s own religion leads to such a belief. Needless to say, Islam mocks at this sort of regardless theory. Allah says: “And verily, this (...) is My Straight Path, so follow it, and follow not (other) paths, for they will separate you away from His Path...”³⁰

3.2.8. Conversion

Islam allows only that conversion which changes a non-Muslim to a Muslim. Converts from Islam to other religions are dubbed Murtad (apostates) and Islam decreed severe punishment for such infidels.³¹ If interfaith dialogue leads to the conversion of people from Islam, Islam puts a ban on this kind of dialogue. This type of conversion may happen when the converts are not satisfied with the spiritual elements in their religion or are ignorant about their religion. For this very reason, Islam made it obligatory upon every Muslim to garner Islamic knowledge. The Prophet says: “Pursuit of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim.”³²

3.2.9. Religious Indifference

To many, a person by mingling too much with people of other religions finds himself vulnerable to suspicion over his faith’s objectivity, or becomes overwhelmed by the charming words of the adherents of other religions. He later becomes indifferent to his religion. We, therefore, should tread the thorny path of interfaith dialogue very carefully. If we are not confident of escaping this lurching, we must refrain from dialogue because this indifference to religion is a kind of hypocrisy, and the hypocrites will undergo severe punishment in the Hereafter. Allah says, “Verily, the hypocrites will be in the lowest depth (grade) of the Fire...”³³ Allah also enjoins us to hold fast Islam and not to be indifferent, “And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allah (i.e. this Quran), and be not divided among yourselves...”³⁴

3.2.10. Apathy to Religious Distinction

Interfaith dialogue should not influence a dialoguer so much so that he gets prepared to deny those distinctions³⁵ that distinguish religions. A Muslim should maintain all kinds of distinctions in every sphere of his life. Hence a Muslim cannot refrain from slaughtering cows in his festival of Eidul Azha just because cow is regarded as sacred animal by the Hindu people. Neither can he abstain from using a microphone for Azan (calling for prayer) not to disturb the people of other realigns especially while they keep sleeping in the

²⁶ Surah Ali Imran, V. 3:19

²⁷ *ibid.*, 3:85.

²⁸ Surah Al-Baqarah, V. 2:147.

²⁹ Surah Ali Imran, V. 3:83.

³⁰ Surah Al-Anam, V. 6:153.

³¹ “Verily, those who disbelieved after their Belief ... never will their repentance be accepted.” Surah Ali Imran, V. 3:90;

“Kill the one who has converted himself (from Islam to any other religion).” Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 9, Hadith No. 6922.

³² *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Vol.1, Hadith No. 224.

³³ Surah An-Nisa, V. 4:145.

³⁴ Surah Ali Imran, V. 3: 103.

³⁵ The same concern is expressed in Christianity as well. See, Bishop Patrick De Rozario (CSC), “Anto Dhormio Shonglap Shomporke Prathomik Dharona” (Primary Idea on Interfaith Dialogue), *Oikkotan*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2004, pp. 10-11

morning. Allah says: “O you, who believe! If you obey a group of those who were given the Scripture (Jews and Christian), they would (indeed) render you disbelievers after you have believed!”³⁶

3.2.11. Aesthetic Preference

The aesthetics of a 'space' in which such an encounter takes place is not less important than the dialogue itself. The aesthetics³⁷ of dialogue can symbolize the core of the interfaith challenge even to a greater degree than the doctrinal differences. There is no universal aesthetics in spiritual practice. Different aesthetic manifestations are characteristic of different faiths. The most important aesthetic expressions are iconography and symbolism, music and song, invocations, language and seating arrangement. If a dialogue's aesthetic expressions do not represent Islam properly and duly, we must refrain from it. Allah says: “O you who believe! Violate not the sanctity of the symbols of Allah...”³⁸

IV. Conclusion

Interfaith dialogue is sometimes regarded by unaware people as an anti-religious action. Their reason is that interfaith dialogue asks us to go to the premise of a non-Muslim not for missionary work but for such a business that restrains us from the proclamation of Islam, while Allah made it mandatory for the Muslims to work for proclamation; as Allah says: “O Messenger (Muhammad Sm.), Proclaim (the Message) which has been sent down to you from your Lord. And if you do not, then you have not conveyed His Message....”³⁹ But a careful observation of the above mentioned articulation which contains statements both for and against interfaith dialogue will clarify that Islam itself calls upon its adherents to work for interfaith dialogue, and that interfaith dialogue and missionary work both are encouraged and patronized by Islam as they are nothing but two independent organs of Islam. Moreover, Islam is the only religion of which Scripture directly calls for interfaith dialogue. If we know the risks Islam has warned us of, we will succeed in saving ourselves from going astray and from leading others astray.

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³⁶ Surah Ali Imran, V. 3:100.

³⁷ Smith, Jane Idleman, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. xiii- 186.

³⁸ Surah Al-Maidah, V. 5:02.

³⁹ *ibid*, 5:67.