



ISLAMIC PARADIGMS FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: A QURANIC AND SUNNAH PERSPECTIVE

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ISLAMIC PARADIGMS FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: A QURANIC AND SUNNAH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Dialogue is the only way that can be a good tool for making less and cease the conflict and tension among the groups. It is the channel for clearing the misconceptions, slanders, and acquisitions from both sides. This paper will investigate the roots or the sources of dialogue, theologically and historically in Islamic traditions, especially the prospects of Islamic paradigms of interfaith dialogue in the light of Quran and Sunnah with references to the Quranic verses and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in brief. Additionally, this study will also propose a potential and positive contribution to continue the dialogue in religious and cultural perspectives as it is the best way to minimize the tension among the masses of different faith and culture. It will also suggest that Muslims should take initiatives in the best interest of religious peace and harmony. Muslims should learn the lesson from the life of the prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his treatment to other people of faith in the best manner. The life of the prophet was the best and the living example that was compatible with the verses of the Quran that clearly direct and address the believers to interact with others and have good relations with mutual understanding.

KEYWORDS: Dialogue, Interfaith dialogue, Islamic paradigm of interfaith dialogue, Quran, and Sunnah perspective.

INTRODUCTION:

Dialogue, in short, according to Ahmet Kurucan and Mustafa Kasim Erol ¹ is a meaningful interaction and exchange between people of different groups with a view for increasing the understanding of subjects. While interfaith dialogue is conceived as the interaction and exchange of religious views among the followers of different faith traditions to listen and understand each other, in a spirit of tolerance, truthfulness, sincerity, respect, and goodwill, without willing the other to accept any respective beliefs or ideas. ²

Md. Sanaullah (2014) describes the term interfaith dialogue comprehensively; according to him, “it’s a cooperative and positive interaction, be it individual or institutional, with the purpose of understanding and developing a common ground in beliefs, concentrating on similarities between faiths, understanding of values and commitment to the world.”³

The holy Quran openly invites for the dialogue,⁴ and similarly, there are many examples of dialogue in the life span of prophet Muhammad (SAW), as he had a substantial number of encounters with all those people who were around him, either in the Meccan period or in Medina, irrespective of their faith and race. He always tried to have a friendly relationship with

¹ Kurucan, Ahmet, and Mustafa Kasim, Dialogue in Islam: Quran-Sunnah-History, p. 18. Great Britain, Dialogue Society. (2012)

² Ibid, p20.

³ Sanaullah, Md. Interfaith Dialogue in Islam: A Scriptural Scrutiny, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science, pp.86-91 Vol. 19, Issue 3, Ver. IV, (2014).

⁴ “Say, “O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you....” Al-Quran. (3:64).

others not only before his prophethood, as he had a commercial partnership with the people even out of Makkah, but also, he had many encounters with the other people of faith after receiving the ministry of prophethood.

ISLAMIC PARADIGM OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE:

Islam is the religion that embraces religious pluralism ⁵and teaches the same values that Muslims have to respect every ideology, culture, community, and religion. The purpose of diversity is to know one another. God did not make us one community because he wanted to test us, and, according to the Quranic statement, all will be accountable to Him on the Day of Judgment. ⁶

As far as interfaith dialogue in the Islamic perspective is concerned, many verses of the Quran and traditions of Muhammad supported and appreciated it to interact with other people of faith.⁷ Because the Qur'an acknowledges that it is not possible for the whole of humanity to become a single religious community; differences are part and parcel of human nature.⁸ So, a man should find out the truth rather than obeying his innermost desires. And, the actual goal of defining the rules of religion is to create a better society in which ethical conducts should be observed.

The prophets were sent to each and every community and they have their

⁵ “Praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. The Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate. Al-Quran, 1:1-2)

⁶ Hilal Wani, Raihanah Abdullah, and Lee Wei Chang.. An Islamic Perspective in Managing Religious Diversity. In Todd Green. (Ed.), Religions, Vol.6, issue, 2, pp. 642-656. (2015). Online available at <http://www.mdpi.com>

⁷ For example, verses, (3:64, 29:46, 2:136).

⁸ Al-Quran, 5:48.

own way of worship.⁹ That is why it was suggested by the Quran to compete with others in good deeds. And in light of this verse, it is also implied that people should not create anarchy for only on the bases of religious belief differences but leave the final judgment to God.¹⁰ So, the best way to diminish the differences is the way of dialogue; to communicate with each other, to solve the difference, to observe tolerance, to respect each other's culture and religious traditions, and to learn others' way of living, culture, and belief.

Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was being considered the true image of the Quran in his real life; he always supported peace and dialogue. If it is to be noted in the event of the conquest of Makkah, he declared that those who want to get asylum in the house of Abu Sufiyan, will be protected and today there will be no reckoning. So, the peace process and dialogue require tolerance and mercy, and these two qualities were visibly present in the Prophet. The teachings of Prophet Mohammed (SAW) are common for all human beings to be in peace with their fellow human beings.¹¹

Kurucan and Kasim Erol (2012) describe that dialogue is a natural expression of our humanness because the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet, both make it clear. The Qur'an states that the fundamental unity of all human beings and their ethnic and linguistic plurality together enable us to engage with and understand one another.¹² It is inherent to every creature or is a common instinct that inspires us to interact with our

⁹ See verses, Al-Quran, (10:47), (16:36), (40:78).

¹⁰ Habib, Mohammad. "Interfaith Engagement: Quranic perspective, In Interreligious insight, Vol.7, N. 3. July 2009, pp.8-18, (2009). Available online at <http://www.interreligiousinsight.org/>

¹¹ See Hilal Wani, Raihanah Abdullah, and Lee Wei Chang, Ibid.

¹² Ahmet Kurucan, Mustafa Kasim Erol p.18.

homogeneous group or population. It is the source that enriches us to share our common feelings, happiness, and worries with our fellow beings. It is a means or better channel of communication that we process our ideas and expressions for a better understanding of each other in every walk of life.

The Holy Quran states:

*“O 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.”*¹³

Thus, dialogue or interaction with each other is present in human's inner disposition, God has already embedded in human nature to discuss and exchange the views with each other, and Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) early life, before his nomination for prophethood had many examples for his interaction and engagement with those people who were around him. Due to his fair and loving treatment for keeping everyone's belongings, money, and other precious things with himself as a trust, because he was the most reliable person among all, and he always would return the belongings back to the owners in the same way and shape. So, observing and experiencing such fair treatment from him, the Meccans had given him the title of al-Sadiq and al-Amin, 'the truthful and the trustworthy'.¹⁴

Such shreds of evidence of the life of prophet Muhammad (SAW) show the best manner towards every individual of society and the best communication in day-to-day affairs with any community or human being around. But when prophet Muhammad (SAW) received the first revelation of the Qur'an, he pronounced himself as a messenger of God. And then, he

¹³ Al Quran, (49:13).

¹⁴ See Ahmet Kurucan, Mustafa Kasim Erol p.18-19.

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faced strong antagonism not only from the people of his own community but also from his own kinsfolks. Despite these difficulties, he processed his mission. During the proclaiming of such message, he suffered severe opposition and even persecution. Instead of provoking his opponents, he presented them with a principle of mutual understanding to cope with the situation because he didn't want to deteriorate the peaceful process of his mission.¹⁵

DIALOGUE IN THE QURANIC PERSPECTIVE:

The Qur'an, as considered by the Muslims, is the first and basic source for doctrinal guidance, the infallible and last revealed book that was directly revealed by God to Prophet Muhammad (SAW). It is being accepted by all Muslims around the world without any doubt. Its message is considered as a commandment in every walk of life, be it related to this world or the next world.

According to Muhammad Zia-UL-Haq (2014), various terms such as "*mukalma*," "*mujadala*," "*mufawadhat*," "*hiwar*," "*muhajjah*," and "*hadith*" have been used in Islamic resources for concepts of dialogue.¹⁶ Further, he explains and gives reference from the book, "*Lisan Al-Arab*,"¹⁷ that the term "*al-hiwar*" has been used with several meanings, such as returning from one place to another, moving from one thing to another,

¹⁵ See Mohammad Habib, *Interfaith engagement: Quranic perspective*, p, 10-11. (2009)

¹⁶ Zia-ul-Haq, Muhammad. (2014) Muslims' Participation in Interfaith Dialogue: Challenges and Prospects,. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 49:4, Fall 2014, pp.613-646.

¹⁷ The *Lisān al-ʿArab*, "The Arab Tongue" was completed by Ibn Manzur in 1290. Occupying 20 printed book volumes it is the most well-known dictionary of the Arabic language, as well as one of the most comprehensive.

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consultation, referring to, a reference to. While “*al-Mahawrah*” is calm consultation and conversation without enmity. So, referring to a paper presented by Ahmed Bhr,¹⁸ he concludes that “*al-Mahawrah*” is close to the meaning of dialogue. And “Al-hiwar” is used in al-Qur’an three times with the meaning of dialogue and is closer to the contemporary meanings of dialogue.

So, there are many verses in the Quran that allow dialogue with its theological context to the other people of faiths. The Quran especially directs Muslims to have a dialogue with people in general on one hand and to establish a relationship with people of the book on the other.

DIALOGUE WITH PEOPLE OF THE BOOK:

Islam has been interacting with other religions since its entire history of inception fourteen hundred years ago. It started its dialogue with local faiths of people in Mecca as normally they were called polytheists, and then with its major contemporary religions, i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and other religious traditions. Such encounters of relations of Muslims with other faiths have been written down in bulk by Muslim writers and historians through different ages, and somehow, they were restricted to acknowledge them with the Quranic instructions and traditions of prophet Muhammad. (SAW)¹⁹

The Quran, especially commands Muslims to have a dialogue with people

¹⁸ Ahmed Bhr, “Effect of Dialogue on Change,” paper presented in the conference on “Islamic Da’wah and Contemporary Changes,” P.120, April 16-17, (2007)

¹⁹ Thomas David. “Islam and the Religious Other”, In David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt and David Thomas (Eds.). *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, p. 148-171, UK, Oxford University Press. (2013).

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of the book.²⁰The people of the book, Kurucan and Kasim Erol (2012), maintain that the Qur'an mentions, are those who believe in the Oneness of God. However, 'People of the Book' refer to those who follow a divine book and a prophet sent by God. This definition includes Jews and Christians as well as others who believe in Abraham and David. The Qur'an counts the Sabians along with Jews and Christians in the following verses and therefore most exegetes and interpreters of the Qur'an include them among the People of Book.²¹

VERSES THAT COMMAND TO 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.'"*²²

This verse, no doubt, draws a map for dialogue, suggests prophet Muhammad (SAW) to establish a relationship with people of the book, and to invite them to be united on common issues based on theology and eschatology.

Mr. Kurucan and Kasim Erol (2012), argue the common issues are such as faith in God, the prophets and the afterlife, principles of practice such as

²⁰ The term "People of the Book" or Ahl al-kitab is mentioned in the Qur'an twenty-four times, referring to Christians and Jews in particular.

²¹ Ahmet Kurucan, Mustafa Kasim Erol. P, 33.

²² Al Quran, (3:64).

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abstinence from adultery, gambling, or drinking, or temporal political, social, cultural or economic issues.²³

In other verse, it is stated:

*“[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.’”*²⁴

This verse also suggests to have dialogue with the people of the book in the best possible way and indicates to argue for building better relation to establish peace and brotherhood, excepts those who didn't treat you well and always hatched conspiracy against you, those people can be treated according to the laws and limits set by Islam.²⁵

VERSES THAT COMMAND DIALOGUE WITH GENERAL PEOPLE, NON-MUSLIMS:

According to Md. Sanaullah (2014), these verses encourage Muslims to endorse the monotheistic faiths that preceded Islam. The Qur'an attests to the Holy Scriptures that came before it including the Torah and the

²³ Ahmet Kurucan, Mustafa Kasim Erol. P, 34.

²⁴ Al Quran, (29:46).

²⁵ Md.Sanaullah, p.87.

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Gospel.²⁶

Allah says in the Holy Quran:

"Say (O Muslims), "We believe in God (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." ²⁷

The Quran is the primary source of Islam which indicates in many verses that humankind should ponder over the strong evidence and signs of natural phenomena, and it exhorts man to know the creator of this universe and respond to Him. For human beings, in particular, the response is to worship Him. The Quran makes it clear that:

"I created jinn and mankind only to worship Me." ²⁸

This verse shows that humankind is not only commanded to worship Him to be responsive but to make known another being too. Further, the Quran also advises to be engaged with each other respectfully and kindly.

²⁶ Ibid, p.36.

²⁷ Al-Quran, (2:136)

²⁸ Al-Quran, (51:15).

The Quran says:

“And He (God) does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves the just.”²⁹

Quran affirms the diversity of race, color, and nationality and guides through such verses to have dialogue for interaction and make known each other. It says,

“O 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 honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all-knowing, all aware.”³⁰

The above-mentioned verse clearly includes any non-Muslim, not just people of the book but people in general. Besides this, there are other verses that indirectly indicate to have relations with other people too.

“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.”³¹

“If your Lord had pleased, He would have made all people a single community, but they continue to have their differences.”³²

²⁹ Al-Quran, (40:80)

³⁰ Al-Quran,(49:13).

³¹ Al-Quran, (5:48).

³² Al-Quran, (11:18-19).

*“Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [O Prophet] compel people to believe?”*³³

So, it has been concluded here, according to Kurucan and Kasim Erol that, the Quran, encourages Muslims, particularly:

- 1) to explore the diversity of ethnicity, culture, and faith, engaging respectfully with different groups.
- 2) to accept that some individuals and groups will not believe in your faith,
- 3) to live with different people but with compassion and acceptance,
- 4) to explore each other's faith and religion with respect and in an attempt to understand one another, and
- 5) to wait patiently until God explains what people have differed about and why.³⁴

Thus, the true spirit of the Qur'anic instruction for engagement with other people is based on justice, kindness, civility, and courtesy, regardless of whether they are People of the Book or others. The examples of the Prophet encourage Muslims to engage in peaceful relations and dialogue with other groups, not limited to Christians, Jews, and Sabians. It is also a good source for conducting the interfaith dialogue.³⁵

³³ Al-Quran, (10:99).

³⁴ Ahmet Kurucan, Mustafa Kasim Erol. P, 37.

³⁵ Ibid.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE FROM SUNNAH PERSPECTIVE:

Though, before Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) prophethood, there are many examples of dialogue and interaction, friendly relations, and commercial partnerships with all kinds of people (atheists, idolaters, and People of the Book) that have been described in many Sirah or history books.³⁶

According to Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (2014) the first such event was, when prophet Muhammad (SAW) went to Syria with his uncle Abu Talib for trade journey and happened to meet with Bahira, the Christian monk, he prophesied that Muhammad was to become a prophet.³⁷ The second event, when Muhammad got the first revelation, then, his wife Khadija took him to her cousin Warqa Ibn Nofal and told him about the revelation. After listening to the whole story from Muhammad, he (Warqa) acknowledged Prophet Muhammad's prophethood authentic.³⁸

Holy Muhammad (SAW), too, recognized justice and honor of the people of other faiths as well. It is reported that when Muslims, before migration to Medina, suffered severe persecution in Mecca by the Quresh, then Muhammad suggested them to migrate to Abyssinia and told them about

³⁶ Ibid, p,70.

³⁷ See Sirat Ibn Hisham, Biography of the prophet, (Inas A. Farid, Trans), p. 25-26. (2000).

³⁸ Ibid, p, 28.

the qualities of the King of Abyssinia, Negus,³⁹ "There is a King who loves justice and, in whose territories, nobody is oppressed." It is also reported that a dialogue was held between the delegation of Muslims with the King of Abyssinia, Negus. After hearing the views of Muslim migrants, the king protected them and allowed them to live in his country without any fear and peacefully.⁴⁰

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) had also dialogue and agreement with the Jews in Medina that resulted in Mithaq-e- Medina. That constitution was to be meant that everyone is protected and will live in the city with full religious liberty. It is also illustrated that prophet Muhammad (SAW) had a dialogue with Christians too. It is reported that one delegation of Christians of Najran, in 633 C.E, comprising sixty people came and met with Prophet Muhammad and initiated dialogue with prophet Muhammad (SAW) on religious matters.⁴¹

So, the legitimacy of interfaith dialogue could be considered as a clear sign from the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and it is provided for Muslims that it is the only way of building peace among interfaith groups.

³⁹ Was the title of King of Abyssinia (Now Ethiopia) his original name was Aṣḥama ibn Abjar.

⁴⁰ Muhammad Zia-ul-haq, P. 629.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 629-30.

The interaction between Muslims and other religions existed culturally, politically, and economically for many years. Such a process of interaction was going very smoothly but, after September eleven attack, the scenario is totally changed due to terrorist attack and then the notion of dialogue shifted to the Muslim communities exclusively. In such a series of dialogue, it has been a good outcome for Muslims to make understand people and to develop a better understanding of Islam and Muslims through Interfaith dialogue.⁴²

Keeping in view, Muslim scholars are very engaged now to show such expression that the majority of Muslims condemned these violent attacks. Only a few people who want to maintain their political authority and impose their own ideology, exploit the religious teachings just to enjoy their own interests. Such kinds of people could be found in almost all religions who do not want peace on earth. Behind such religious tension and violence, there are some other economic and communal factors which might be the reasons for such clashes.

⁴² Halafoff, Anna. (2013) "Encounter as Conflict: Interfaith Peace-Building", In David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt and David Thomas. (eds.). *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, pp. 262-280, UK, Oxford University Press.

CONCLUSION:

Dialogue is a conversation among persons or different groups to know each other. Human beings always have been in search of interaction and connection with each other for getting the common problems solved as it is human's natural disposition that God has already embedded in human nature to discuss and exchange the views with each other. Islam is one of the major world religions and claims to be the religion of all humans. Thus, it teaches the lesson of equality of all human beings produced from one single parent with common feelings and sharing the common characteristics and instincts of humanity. Islam propagates the diversity of culture, religions, and civilizations. Therefore, the Quran as well as Prophet Muhammad (SAW) have never closed the channels of dialogue with other communities. Dialogue is a kind of religious duty of Muslims, they have to participate in dialogue with others so that the misconceptions regarding Islam may be cleared and, thus it will enhance the contribution towards peace, religious harmony, and coexistence. Islam forbids Muslims from abusing the idols and deities worshiped by others. Though Islam also commands Muslims to preach followers of other faiths but there should be no compulsion and invitation to Islam should be made with wisdom and fair preaching; and argumentation is to be made in a better way. Apart

from this, Islam also invites followers of other faiths towards common points, propositions, agreements, or tenets, so that cooperation could be made to live in peace; and guides Muslim followers in the proper way of addressing and dealing with others.



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