



inter-faith dialogue for peace and harmony (Islamic Perception)

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Islam, Qur'an, Inter-Faith, Dialogue, Arabs

Dr. Mohd. Habib

Professor (Associate), Department of Religious Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala

ABSTRACT *The Islamic perception of interfaith dialogue underlines in the fact that people will certainly differ in the matter of faith as per their own understanding of the world - physical and metaphysical. The differences of opinion in religious matters are part and parcel of the nature of the human mind. But one should try to find out the truth. The Qur'an accepts plurality of religions and instructs that different religious groups of humanity may continue to pursue their own faiths, but what is more important is to excel each other in good deeds, as it leads to establishment of peace and moral order in society.*

To understand the Islamic perception regarding interfaith dialogue it will be appropriate to understand the historical situations in which the holy Qur'an - the basic source of Islam revealed. How the Qur'an responded to the reaction of the people of various faiths at the moment of revelation. In fact that response provides basic insights of Islam about the interfaith dialogue.

It is a well known fact that the Qur'an was revealed in two cities of Arabia namely Makkah and Madinah during the period of twenty three years. The revelation began in Makkah and ended in Madinah. At that time Makkah was a famous centre of international trade. Therefore, it was holding a socially and politically significant place in whole Arabia. The inhabitants of Makkah, particularly the Quraysh tribe, were engaged in trade with Roman Empire, the followers of Christianity. There were Jews in Madinah and in some other parts of Arabia along with other Arabian tribes. Thus, Arabs were familiar with Judaism and Christianity before the Qur'anic revelation. In spite of that due to certain reasons most of them did not accept Judaism and Christianity. However, few Arab tribes had accepted Christianity living on the border areas in their own monotheistic way, which was different from the Roman Christian practices.

However, among the populace of Makkah Jews and Christians were not in a noticeable habitation. The Makkans by and large were pagans and were not following any prophetic revealed scripture. The prophet Muhammad(s)² was borne in Quraysh tribe and also was brought up in this city. The idol worship, which was a common practice among the inhabitants of Makkah, had not appealed him and he began meditation in a cave Hira in search of truth. It was cave Hira, where he received the first revelation of the Qur'an and proclaimed himself as *Rasulallah* - the messenger of Allah. As a result he faced strong opposition not only from the people of his own tribe and other Makkans, but also from his own relatives.

When Qur'anic revelation begins and Prophet Muhammad(s) preaches the same people reacts and become intolerant. As a result he had to go through severe persecutions. He bears all kinds of persecution with a remarkable perseverance and instead to confront by any kind of force he presents before the opponents a formula of mutual understanding to cope with the situation in the form of Qur'anic verse revealed in Makkah which is con-

sidered as the God decree, "For you is your faith and for me is mine" (109:6). Thus from the very beginning the Qur'anic teachings were not to be imposed upon any one. The Prophet(s) adopted the same formula in Madinah, the first Islamic state, where prophet Muhammad(s) was at the helm of affairs of the state,

There is no compulsion in religion: the right way clearly stands out from error, so whoever rejects Taghut or devil and believes in Allah, he indeed grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. (2:256)

These verses could be taken as the fundamental principles of the Qur'anic perspective on inter-religious understanding which emphasizes that there is no compulsion in the matter of faith. However, the Qur'anic revelation motivates men to adopt right path instead of treading upon wrong path. The right path is considered to lead life as per nature. That is the reason the other name of Islam is *Deen-e-Fitrat* which means the way of nature.

Thus, the revelations of both Makkah and Madinah clarify that the Qur'anic teachings do not impose any type of injunction in the matter of faith. The revelation helps one to see the right path and not to follow the wrong path. The Qur'anic perception of interfaith understanding and interaction underlines that human being as a whole could not believe in any single faith. People will certainly differ in the matter of faith as per their own understanding of the world - physical and metaphysical. With regard to this the Qur'an even poses questions to the prophet Muhammad(s),

If it had been thy Lord's will, they would all have believed, - All who are on earth! Will thou then force them till they are believers? (10:99)

In another verse the Qur'an expresses the same idea in different way and again raises questions on the missionary zeal of Prophet,

Thou wouldst only, per chance, fret thy self to death, following after them,

in grief, if they believe not in this message. (18:6)

If one reads these two verses keeping in mind the inherent ideas of the verses "there is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) and "for you is your faith and for me is mine", (109:6) the Qur'anic perception to other faiths becomes very clear which is not intolerant as projected.

Poverty stricken masses of Makkah were mainly groping in many superstitions. They believed in various gods and goddesses to seek solace in absence of any guidance to betterment. The upper class merchants, by and large, were hedonists. They ridiculed the very idea of any revealed truth. The Qur'anic revelation termed Makkans of that nature as unbelievers i.e. *Kafirs*- literally those who hide or reject truth knowingly out of arrogance. Makkans were doing so with Qur'anic revelation even when they possessed no higher truths or revealed scripture. However, Judaism and Christianity were having their presence in the area. Christians and Jews who possessed revealed scriptures were termed as *Ahl al-Kitab* i.e. people of the book in the Qur'an which further appeal to them for mutual understanding and compromise on common points. (3:64)

Not only that, the Qur'an makes it mandatory to Muslims to believe in all the prophets and forbids making distinction between them. Even it reminds many of them by names. Thus Qur'an confirms truth presented by these prophets in different periods. Moreover, it relates previous revelation with its own and safeguards it,

And to you we have revealed the scripture with the truth, confirming whatever scripture was before it, and to safeguard it. So Judge between them by that which Allah has revealed, and follow not there desires away from the truth, which has come to you. For each we have given you a code of law and a traced out way. Had Allah wished he could have made you one community. But that he may try you by that which he has given you (He has made you as you are). So vie one with another in good deeds. To Allah you will all return, and he will then inform you of that wherein you differ. (5:48)

Here Qur'an accepts that it is not possible for whole humanity to become a single religious community. The main purpose of religions is to create a society in which ethical conduct of a person prevails. So men should vie with one another in good deeds. It is also suggested in the foregoing (5:48) verse that divergent religious groups should postpone their differences regarding faiths up to the final decision of God and live peacefully. The following verses of the Qur'an further clarifies the point,

Those who believe (this Qur'an) and those who are Jews, and the Sabeans and the Christians and the Magians and the Polytheists – Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. No doubt Allah is witness over all things. (22:17)

The same notion is manifested in another verse of the Qur'an in which Allah instructs Prophet Muhammad,

To each people we have given sacred rites, which they are to perform; so let them not dispute with you of the matter, but do you invite them to your Lord. You indeed follow right guidance. (22:67)

The same instruction is further repeated in another verse,

Each one has a goal or direction towards which he turns to express his faith so vie with another in good works. (2:148)

From the foregoing discussion it is quite apparent that the Qur'an accepts plurality of religions and instructs that different religious groups of humanity may continue to pursue their own faiths, but what is more important is to excel each other in good deeds, as good deeds lead to establishment of peace and moral order in society. Further more, Allah instructs Muslims to recognize unity of the essence of faiths. As the Qur'an represents unity of God, 'Allah' the one creator, unity of revelation and unity of Mankind,

Say (O Muslims): we believe in Allah and which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the (other) prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered. (2:136)

However, it will be an exaggeration to say that Islam does not differ from other faiths. It has many conceptual and practical differences with various faiths. As mentioned earlier that the Qur'an revealed in two Arabian cities Makkah and Madinah where the Qur'an and *sahib-i-Qur'an* – Prophet Muhammad(s) mainly addressed to three different religious groups – pagan Arabs, Jews and Christians from whom *Muslim Ummah*- Muslim community initially evolved out. In this matter as mentioned above the Qur'an instructs to resolve differences amicably and focus on right deeds. However, The Qur'an strongly exhorts that its followers should never disgrace to the belief systems of others even that of polytheists. Thus Qur'an says,

Revile not those to whom they pray beside Allah lest they wrongfully revile Allah through ignorance. (6:108)

To the Qur'an human being is supreme creation of God and is most respectable, irrespective of their caste, tribe, colour, creed and nationalities. Thus Qur'an declares,

We have honoured the children of Adam. We carry them on the land and the sea, and have made provision of good things for them, and have preferred them above many of those whom we have created with a marked preference. (17:70)

The Qur'an exhorts Muslims not to discriminate between people on the basis of race, colour, languages, nationalities etc., as these are also signs of Allah's presence and his greatness. It is manifested in the following verse of the Qur'an,

And of his signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variation of your languages and colours. Herein indeed are portents for men of knowledge. (30:22)

Many more verses of the Qur'an could be quoted in the context of interfaith dialogue. However, the above discussion makes it amply clear that the Qur'an teaches its followers to leads their life with the outlook of peace and peaceful understanding with the people of other faiths. But unfortunately in today's media Islam is portrayed as a violent faith which cannot ready to coexist with other faiths.

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