

INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE; A SOLUTION FOR GLOBAL PEACE

*Dr. Muhammad Khan & Arshmah Jamil**

Abstract

Interfaith dialogue has surfaced as an emblem of peace becoming a voice for peaceful relations amongst the adherents of different religions in a world embroiled in wars, conflicts and religious intolerance. It focuses on the dialogue of the followers of different religions especially on a scholarly level to identify the commonalities in various religions in order to proceed towards the common aim of communal harmony. This paper aims to examine the importance of interfaith dialogue in contemporary era and provides the rationale to pursue this dialogue by elucidating statements from the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith. Furthermore, it examines the rationale of inter-faith dialogue present in other religions including Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism. The dialogue faces various challenges which need to be dealt with a comprehensive approach. As a result of this dialogue, mistrust and inaccurate perceptions will be removed and empathy between religious communities will be enhanced. The inter-faith dialogue will not only open channels of communication between the factions that are unable to interact normally but also confront the realities of hate, discrimination and violence in our society.

Keywords: Interfaith, Dialogue, Environment, Conflict-Resolution, Hadith, Rationale.

Introduction

The root of the word dialogue originates from the Greek word 'dialogues' from *dia* (across) and *legin* (to speak). In essence, it is an effort to share meaning with someone and deepen understanding about a particular subject. Interfaith dialogue implies a conversation between different groups or individuals with an aim of enhancing mutual understanding and engaging in a positive manner. This type of dialogue is different from a debate where the aim is to win an argument or persuade others to accept one's viewpoint.

David Yankelovich writes in his book '*The magic of Dialogue*'¹ that it has the potential to transform conflict into cooperation. He argues that dialogue is a conversation carried out under three conditions: Firstly it operates under the condition of equality for all; secondly it operates in an environment where

¹Dr. Raja Muhammad Khan has vast experience of research and teaching. He is regular contributor of research articles and Arshmah Jamil is PhD scholar.

listening to others with empathy is required to deepen understanding and lastly it provides the necessary interaction to address assumptions out in the open.

All examples from Islamic history, the teachings of Holy Quran and Sunnah require Muslims to engage positively with their fellow human beings from diverse cultural and religious groups. It is the prerogative of the individual Muslim to explore in various ways in which they can participate in formal or informal dialogue.

Fetullah Gullen, prominent Turkish preacher, writer and Islamic opinion leader strongly believes in religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. In his paper '*The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue*'² published in 1999, he maintains that dialogue is necessary and all people, regardless of nation or political borders have more in common than they often realized.

Inter-Faith Dialogue for Conflict-Resolution

In his book *Interfaith Dialogue and Peace-building*³, David Smock highlights the importance of interfaith dialogue and Peace-building. According to him, dialogue involves: High-level religious leaders who speak collectively as advocates for peace, elite interfaith bodies who engage in conflict mediation between combatants and grassroots participants who unite across religious divisions to promote cross-community interaction and develop participants into agents of reconciliation.

In the peace building theory and practice, there has been an enhanced focus on transforming the conflict intervention from an outsider, neutral, expert approach to a partnership facilitator approach. This approach is effective as it is designed to empower people to develop values such as non-violence, courage, wisdom and compassion.

Religious leaders play a pertinent role in conflict resolution as they have the potential to influence policy and law makers as well as the wider community. Most religious leaders serve as the representative in dialogue during the time of the conflict or post-conflict aiming for reconciliation. This is because they are competent, knowledgeable and committed to their religions and can avoid misinterpretation during the dialogue process. The religious leaders can build healthy and cooperative relationship with their counterparts of other faith. They

would be a role model for a positive and sustainable dialogue by setting a high standard of building tolerance, rapport and justice with non-Muslim community. Interfaith dialogue can also interconnect public policy through a variety of avenues, such as increased religious literacy in state officials and incorporating Religious Transnational Actors (RTAs) and soft power entities into peacemaking processes. Career diplomats and other officials must actively engage in this process where their knowledge regarding religious beliefs and values of the people with whom they routinely engage is enhanced. RTAs such as clergy, academics, religious scholars, and students can have a substantial impact on policy and interfaith discussions. These individuals work outside the government and possess "soft power," or the ability to directly and indirectly influence state policy⁴. Consequently, public policy can encourage these actors to participate effectively by establishing cultural and academic exchanges, as well as peace building for global conflicts.

Rationale for Interfaith Dialogue

Qur'anic Rationale

The verses of Holy Quran provide the strongest rationale for dialogue. According to Holy Quran:

*"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."*⁵ (Al-Quran 49:13).

This verse clearly articulates Islam's call for embracing diversity and understanding each other. Fourteen centuries ago, Islam made the greatest universal call the world has ever witnessed. The Qur'an calls the People of the Book (Christians and Jews primarily):

*Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we take not, from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say you: "Bear witness that we are Muslims (i.e., those who have surrendered to God's Will)"*⁶ (Qur'an 3:64)

This call comes in the ninth year of the Hijra. A very important point addressed in this call was that in case this call was rejected, Muslims were to adopt the attitude expressed in another Surah known as Al-Kafirun⁷:

"Your religion is for you; my religion is for me."
[Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-Kafirun (109:6)]

That is, if this call is not accepted, Muslims will continue on their path and leave others to go on their own path.

The Qur'an verifies 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 [Al-Qur'an: Surah Al Baqarah (2:136)]

This verse is important to understand the value and respect that has been given to other scriptures and it is clearly ordained that Islam does not differentiate and makes distinctions between other faiths.

Islam has always encouraged interfaith dialogue for the sake of world peace. According to Quran⁹:

Say (O Muhammad.): “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” [Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-Imran (3: 64)]

Islam places utmost emphasis on respecting people from diverse religions: This is clearly articulated in Quran¹⁰

“And insult not those whom they (disbelievers) worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge.” [Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-An'am, (6:108)]

These verses accept that Islam approved interfaith dialogue for its adherents but also encourages the people of other religions to come forward for the sake of peace and harmony.

It is not only the Holy Qur'an that offers a rationale for interfaith dialogue but also the Hadith of the Holy Prophet that vouched its significance.

The Hadith Rationale

The life of the Prophet Muhammad shows us that he was a model of positive engagement with the people around him and even before he became the

Prophet he was known as Al-Sadiq (Truthful) and Al- Amin (trustworthy). Thus even before the revelation of the word of God (Holy Qur'an), the Prophet (P.B.U.H) engaged with others due to obedience to the norms of God's creation known as innate disposition (fitra) which every human being possesses. In the Prophet's life the charter of Madinah for the citizens of Madinah city state and the Treaty of Hudaibiah made with the people of Makkah were two important documents that testify the importance of dialogue.

People residing in Madinah irrespective of the religions they followed lived a life of peace and harmony under the jurisdiction of the Charter of Madinah. Conflict resolution was apparent in the discussion of treaties and truces with non-Muslims during this time. The agreement between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Constitution of Medina ensured that once a treaty is made, all people in that area are protected¹¹ and non-Muslims who have a promise with Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) were protected regardless of whether the region in which they are located has signed a treaty¹².

Several hadith reveal that the Prophet (P.B.U.H) was always resistant to display anger and unhurried to fight non- Muslims. Rather than calling for jihad when the tribe of Daus refused the invitation to embrace Islam, he prayed for them. Further emphasis of his patience is present in al-Bukhari's declaration that "Patience is to be observed at the first stroke of a calamity."¹³ Al-Bukhari, Sahih, Book of Funerals, (2: 218).

The strongest example of Prophet (P.B.U.H) supporting peace efforts is narrated from Abu Hurayra, who said, "Allah's Apostle said,

"The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger"¹⁴ [Al-Bukhari, Sahih, Book of Good Manners, chapter 76, hadith 135, (8: 86-87).]

The Same Nature of all Religions

All religions including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism accept the same source for themselves. A Muslim is true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and all other Prophet. There is oneness and basic unity in all religions which is a symphony of God's blessings and mercy and the universality of belief in religion. Religion provides a system of belief that embraces all races and beliefs and united everyone together in brotherhood according to Gullen¹⁵.

Regardless of how the adherents implement faith in their daily routine, the common fact is that all religions exalt general accepted values such as love, forgiveness, tolerance, mercy, human rights and peace. The messages by Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) or by Prophet Musa, Prophet Isa as well as messages from Buddha, Zarathustra, Lao-Tzu, and Confucius all preached these values.

Allah says in the Qur'an:

"O Mankind: We created you from a male and a female; and made you into tribes and nations that you may get to know each other. And verily, most honored before God is the most virtuous." – [Al-Qur'an 49:13]⁶

It can be assessed from the above quote in the Qur'an that all people are made equal in God's eyes and one's true test of character is not decided by the tribe/ethnicity/sect the person belongs to; but the degree of virtuousness of the individuals. Furthermore, Holy Qur'an stresses on the importance of unity by declaring that all of the God fearing believers of this world are a part of a single brotherhood.

"And verily this Brotherhood of yours is a single Brotherhood, and I am your Lord and Cherisher: therefore fear me (and no other)."⁷ [Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-Mu'minun 23:52]

The purpose of Inter Faith Dialogue is to create a social change through collective effort for a peaceful co-existence with followers of other faiths. This dialogue would not only remove misconceptions, mistrust, and inaccurate perceptions but also identifies the common values and understandings between Muslims and followers of other religions. The opening of channels of communication between the different factions that are unable to interact normally will lead to a greater personal or community growth and understanding.

The rationale for interfaith dialogue exists not only in Islam but in other religions including Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and Hinduism.

Christianity

Both Islam and Christianity urge for dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and Christians. The church teachings regarding interfaith dialogue are

positive and encouraging:

“The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator; in the first place among them are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day”¹⁸
[Second Vatican Council, Lumen Gentium 16]

This statement issued from the second Vatican Council signifies the positive attitude towards dialogue between Muslims and Christians. The document places importance on striving sincerely for mutual understanding and aiming to join hands towards the goal of safeguarding and fostering social justice, freedom, peace and moral values. The need for harmony through dialogue is reflected in the Gospel’s call where it places emphasis on loving each other.

Christians, just like Muslims have to play a prominent role in creating a society where they can co-exist with their neighbors and live peacefully.

The Guidelines for Interfaith events and dialogue emphasize this further by asserting that

“All our encounters with people of other faiths must be based on the Christian principles of faith, hope and love. They ought to also be based on respect for human rights, tolerance of difference and openness to new experiences and fresh learning.”¹⁹

The Holy Qur’an gives clear guidance to Muslims about having a cooperative attitude towards Christians and it says

‘Argue with them in ways that are best’²⁰.
[Al-Qur’an: Surah An-Nahl (16.125)]

Scholars also assert the significance of Christian-Muslim Dialogue. ‘*The Pastor and The Imam*²¹’, a book written by Nigerian Iman Muhammad Ashafa and co-authored with a Christian Pastor Wuye highlight the importance of interfaith dialogue. According to them Interfaith dialogue presents an ideal opportunity for Muslims and Christians to understand each other and only through this understanding, conflicts will be prevented. They contend that the violence between the two is a result of misperceptions, assumptions and stereotyping. Ashafa argues that to practice forgiveness is the ideal quality and was followed earnestly by the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H). To elucidate his arguments he cites Quranic verses (49:6), (4:83) encouraging Muslims to be always be assured about the accuracy of information shared and cites Qur’anic verse (4:148) to correct evil

talk. Wuye and Ashafa recognize the importance of finding a common ground and unearth the similarities between Islam and Christianity supported with Qur'anic and Biblical verses. Interfaith dialogue is not restricted to Muslim and Christian encounters. This dialogue can be enlarged to include the third Abrahamic tradition, Judaism.

Judaism

There is a special relationship between Jews, Christians and Muslims that cannot be overlooked. The Qur'an refers to them in a collective manner as the '*Ahl-al-kitab*' or 'People of The Book' where the translation implies 'followers of an earlier revelation'²² as in [Al Quran: Surah Al-Imran (3:199)]. In essence, all three religions are connected through their common worship of the same God. There are various verses in Qur'an which do not refer directly to Christians but to monks who worship 'the one God'. Quranic verses from [Surah Al Qasas (28: 52-55)]²³ refer to both Jews and Christians as 'those unto whom we have vouchsafed revelation aforetime' predicting that Christians and Jews would recognize and profess the beliefs of Islam, Judaism and Christianity were one and the same.

For Jews, the basis for a theology of dialogue can be found, in Leviticus (19:33-34)²⁴:

"When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The stranger who lives with you shall be treated like a native-born. Love him as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

The importance of loving the stranger is emphasized by the fact that it is commanded on 36 separate occasions in the Torah. Understanding the other is dependent upon embracing the dignity of difference. In essence, there must be a willingness to understand difference in order to enhance understanding.

Similarly, the message of embracing diversity is mentioned in Al-Hujurat (49:13)²⁵ This Qur'anic text clearly places emphasis on the diversity amongst Mankind with a comprehensive affirmation that the purpose of different groups to enhance empathy with each other. The point is reinforced by several other verses clearly pointing out that diversity in color, faith, culture and ethnicity was intended by the creator.

*"If your Lord had pleased, He would have made all people a single community, but they continue to have their differences."²⁶
(Al-Quran: Surah Al-Hud, 11:118)*

*"Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed? So can you [O Prophet] compel people to believe?"²⁷
(Al-Quran: Surah Al-Yunus, 10:99)*

The rationale for inter-faith dialogue also exists in Buddhism which is one of the most tolerant religions historically.

Buddhism

The dominant philosophy of Buddhism is 'live and let live' and throughout history Buddhists have never interfered or done harm to any other religion. The 14th Dalai Lama has done considerable interfaith work throughout his life as he believes that the common goal of all religions is to foster tolerance, love and altruism.

The common aspect between Buddhism and Islam is the concept of the consequence of actions. For Muslims, all humans will be judged on the basis of their right and wrong deeds on the Day of Judgement. The Holy Quran states this

'Whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it'²⁸(Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-Zalzala 99:7-8).

An in another verse²⁹ it is mentioned

*"Then, he whose balance (of good deeds) will be (found) heavy, (6)
Will be in a life of good pleasure and satisfaction. (7)
But he whose balance (of good deeds) will be (found) light, (8)
Will have his home in a (bottomless) Pit." (9)
[Al-Qu'ran : Al-Qari'ah 101 : 6 -9]*

These teachings make Muslims realize that this life is a temporary existence and their good deeds will be rewarded in Paradise.

This belief is similar to the Noble Truths of Buddhism which state that all life is transitory and suffering is an inevitable part of it³⁰. For Buddhists, the only way to escape suffering is to achieve nirvana by distancing from personal attachments and following the Eightfold Path. One of the important elements of this path is known as 'Karma' which states that every good action will be

rewarded and every bad action will be punished. There are some schools of Buddhism that claim that after death, the souls with good karma enter the seven hierarchical heavens that correspond to the degree of person's virtuousness, while those with bad karma enter one of the many hells that relate to the degree of person's evilness. The unified aspect that both Muslims and Buddhists believe is that every action has a consequence and encourages the followers to do good deeds.

Although Islam does not have a common heritage with Buddhism like Judaism and Christianity it has theological motivations that encourage Muslims to pursue dialogue with Buddhists.

Allah says in the glorious Qur'an:

"If Allah had so willed, He would have made [mankind] a single religion [or community], but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: therefore, strive to race each other in all virtues"³¹ (Al Quran: Surah Al-Mai'dah 5:48).

This verse implies that Allah deliberately created diversity amongst Mankind's nations and in order to nurture righteous actions and foster dialogue across difference.

Inter-Faith Dialogue: The Prominent Challenge

While Inter-faith dialogue is an excellent initiative towards harmony and peace, it is faced with an important challenge which is the inability to unite the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations on which the harmony is sought. The external factors such as the need to do damage control after provocative attacks on members of another faith by a radical faction or the need to fight deadly conflict or crime can provide a powerful impetus for interreligious cooperation.

The Suggested Strategy for Interfaith Dialogue-As a Way Forward

Despite the commonality that exists between Islam and other faiths, a widening rift that exists between Muslims and followers of other faith cannot be ignored. Something as beautiful as religion which serves the basic purpose of providing peace to adherents is actually being utilized to fuel conflict and hatred. While violence in the name of religion can never be completely stopped, its

prevention is possible. The basic principles which can form an inherent component of inter-faith dialogue are: Respect for others, and life.

Inter-faith dialogue recognizes that human beings are fundamentally equal and respect for human dignity is the fundamental principle of our religion. Respect for people who belong to different religions, even with the ones we most profoundly disagree is the first step. By giving respect to people from other religion, we can engage in meaningful dialogue.

The Glorious Qur'an says:

*"And hold fast, all together, by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves;"*³² [Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-Imran 3:103]

Respect for others must also include respecting their freedom of expression. Humanity is characterized by the ability to freely express one's thoughts and views. The prime purpose of the dialogue is to accept these differences and enhance understanding about the view point of the other sect. It does not involve persuading the other religion that 'we are right' and 'you are wrong' rather it is a platform to increase empathy and deepen understanding of the other's perspective.

Human life is a creation of God and its respect and value must be given the highest precedence even if the world perceives it as expendable for reasons such as political power, economic gain etc. The care and protection of lives of people belonging to any religion is another aspect of inter-religious dialogue. The Muslim community must unite to engage in dialogue in which the importance of protecting the lives of individuals belonging from any is religion is discussed.

The Holy Quran says³³

"..Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land – it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely."
[Al Quran: Surah Al-Imran 5:32]

Furthermore, interfaith dialogue must follow certain etiquettes to enhance its effectiveness.

- Firstly, the dialogue must be conducted within a meta-religious framework that accepts the common beliefs of the participants and is not prejudiced to their differences

- Secondly, the dialogue should provide a platform for candid discussion about the differences without being insulting or condescending.
- Thirdly, the dialogue must work on a common agenda where the participant should seek not just similarities and differences but insights into how these differences or similarities could enhance understanding of their faith tradition.
- Fourthly, the dialogue must challenge the participant to understand the perspective of the other religion but this should not challenge their faith.
- Fifthly, the dialogue should seek opportunities for common cause without compromising on principle.

Given the realities of the present day, where differences and conflicts exist, interfaith dialogue can no longer be confined to a discussion about peace and understanding. The dialogue must be action oriented and confront the realities of hate, discrimination and violence in society. This sense of shared concern to address humanitarian issues will cause the dialogue to go beyond conversation and transformed into action. Words and dialogue on their own cannot just lead to reconciliation and institutions for dialogue must be created. These institutions must introduce cultural exchange programs and create platforms for a common study of Islam and other faiths.

NOTES

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- ⁶ Al-Qur'an Surah Ali Imran (3:64)
- ⁷ Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-Kafirun (109:6)
- ⁸ Al-Qur'an: Surah Al Imran (3:64)
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- ¹⁰ Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-Anam, (6:108).
- ¹¹ Al-Bukhari, Sahih, Book of Obligations of Khums, War Booty, (4: 255)
- ¹² Al-Bukhari, Sahih, Book of Obligations of Khums, War Booty, (4: 256).
- ¹³ Al-Bukhari, Sahih, Book of Funerals, (2: 218).
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- ²³ Al Quran: Surah Al-Qasas (28: 52-55)
- ²⁴ Bible: Leviticus (19:33-34)
- ²⁵ Al Qur'an: Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13)
- ²⁶ Al Qur'an: Surah Al-Hud (11:118-19)
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