

Interfaith Dialogue: An Indian Perspective

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Human beings share life and its varied manifestations with other animals but stand unique from them with their intellect and power of expression. The speaking animals that human beings are known to be, are also marked by their gregariousness as they live together with fellow human beings forming social bonds. According to the Islamic view of human evolution, man started leading a civilised life from the very beginning. Islamic tradition tells us that the first human couple, Prophet Adam and Hawwa (Eve), not only had intellect but both of them were highly revered creatures of God sent to this world. Islamic tradition can also be interpreted to the effect that this first human couple was sent to this world as a result of a dialogue between them and Satan.¹ The Holy Qur'an traces this dialogue to the very idea of divine human creation. The Holy Book has it that when Allah informed the angels about his will to create man, the angels expressed apprehensions over this divine project asking if their Lord intended to create someone who would disobey him and shed blood. Then Allah revealed to them his grand strategy.² The first ever interaction between man and his creator was also in the form of a dialogue where Allah asked the human beings 'Am I not your Creator' with the reply 'why not'.³ Moreover, when God asked the angels to prostrate before Adam, they obeyed the divine command except Satan who refused to bow before Adam after having a dialogue with God.⁴

Islamic Tradition of Religious Dialogue

The Islamic tradition has a glorious history of religious dialogue. The Prophet of Islam (pbuh) has set many examples of dialogue, both verbal and written. The Prophet (pbuh) entered into a dialogue both with the followers of revealed religions and idol worshippers.

The prophetic dialogue was also accompanied with the establishment of a tradition of co-operation on common human grounds with followers

of other religions. To institutionalise this co-operation, the Prophet (pbuh) concluded written agreements with followers of different religions which can serve as models of co-operation and coexistence for the pluralist societies of today. We witness the first ever instance of the Prophet's activism for cooperation with others in acts of goodness and to undo excesses and injustice, in Mecca, when he was yet to be bestowed with prophethood. He (pbuh) became part of this agreement, called *Hilful fudul*, and accorded so much importance to it that even after he was granted prophethood, he time and again expressed his willingness to be part of any such agreement, if invited to do so.

After migrating to Madina, the Prophet (pbuh) in order to establish peace, stability and a civil society based on human rights, concluded a deal with the Christians, Jews and *mushriqin* (idol worshippers) which is recorded in history as *mithaq-e-Madina* (The Pact of Madina). The most striking feature of the Pact that has a very meaningful relevance to our own socio-political situation in India as well as other pluralist and democratic societies is the fact that it accepted all the religious entities represented in the Pact as forming one single *umma* (people).

The Pact of Madina accepts religious freedom as a core value and right, and guarantees the equal rights and obligations of all the participants in the Pact in matters of state. This also establishes the principle that the religious differences of a society or people do not put any obstacles in the affairs of the state and its defence against any external enemy.

The Pact of Hudaibiyah also forms a great landmark in the Islamic tradition of dialogue. This Pact, which was concluded with the Muslims seemingly in a position of weakness, paved the way on the one side for the suspension of hostilities against Muslims and for opening interaction and negotiations with different religious groups on the other. These negotiations facilitated the process of mutual understanding and coexistence becoming a reality as well as creating conditions for an unobstructed propagation of the Islamic message.

The fourth most important initiative taken by the Prophet (pbuh) having utmost relevance in the context of the present religious dialogue, is his Farewell Address, which was addressed not only to the Muslims but to all humankind, containing the universal human

message of Islam in the most lucid language. The Farewell Address, the *khutba hujjat al-wida'*, not only constitutes the first Charter of Human Rights but also provides a firm ground for peaceful coexistence and the promotion of human values.

All four models of the Prophet's (pbuh) acts of peace-making through dialogue – *Hilf ul-fudul*, the Pact of Madina, the Pact of Hudaibiyyah, and the Farewell Address – contain a message and guidance that can help us in the process of initiating a multi-layered dialogue in present day pluralist societies, a dialogue that will have a set destination, clear principles and strategies, gentle and persuasive language, thus leading to the establishment of a universal human fraternity where mankind will be free from all discrimination based on creed, colour and race and the last divine message will reach all human beings in its natural form.

Religious Dialogue During the Time of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs

The age of the Rightly-guided Caliphs also is very important in the context of religious dialogue. Muslims in this period of time achieved many victories and huge tracts of land came under their suzerainty, which also enlarged their area of interaction with other religions. The Muslim urge for dialogue also found expression in wars. The Islamic principles of war made it mandatory for the Muslims first to offer the message of Islam to the adversary. It implied the importance that Muslims accorded to dialogue even during a war. This Muslim insistence on dialogue and negotiation underscored their primary attitude of avoiding confrontation to the utmost possible extent and instead trying to resolve tensions through peaceful means. It is during this time that the Muslims came into contact with the Zoroastrian and Coptic traditions, who were also engaged in a meaningful dialogue.

During the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, Muslims became a super power in the world but still they continued with the tradition of religious dialogue and promoted it to the extent that it developed into a mass culture of mutual coming together: socially, culturally and intellectually. It was this surge in inter-religious dialogue that even amongst Muslims saw the emergence of different sects, based on differences of opinion on, and mutually contradicting interpretation of, Islamic teachings. The Muslim practice of according religious

freedom to non-Muslims was so strong that during the first century after the Hijra (the Prophet's migration), the non-Muslims of Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Persia and Turkistan, which came under Islamic rule, were allowed to maintain their traditional faiths. It took three to four centuries for these areas to turn into Muslim-majority areas. This change was the result of the tradition of religious dialogue, not the use of force or coercion.

In Spain and the Balkans

A new tradition of religious interaction took shape after the advent of Islam in Spain. As the majority of the people were of other faiths, Muslim rulers in Spain not only ensured their religious freedom but also made them equal participants in the governance and administration. Non-Muslims were never subjected to any religious discrimination or repression and had all the avenues of progress open to them. These policies turned Spain into probably the first pluralist society of its kind in the entire human history, where the process of religious interaction and dialogue extended from homes and market places to the royal court. It was however, reversed when the Christians regained power and eliminated all that was Islamic in Spain.

Another experiment in pluralism was undertaken in the Balkans during the Ottoman Caliphate. Here also Muslims lived for a very long time, particularly from the 15th to the 19th centuries, together with Catholic Christians and Jews with all peace. No major incident of religious conflict has been reported during this entire period, while instances of mutual tolerance and coexistence abound.

Religious Dialogue in India

Muslims came to India with their faith in broad human unity and brotherhood. Muslim rulers generally treated their non-Muslim subjects with tolerance and respected their human rights, inspired by the principles of Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Muslims knew about India even during the life-time of the Prophet (pbuh), as Arab traders frequented the coastal areas of South India. The same traders later became the propagators of Islam. But in Northern India, the advent of Islam was heralded by the military campaign led by Mohammed Bin Qasim in 711 CE in Sindh, which created the conditions for the

Muslims to come to India, where their numbers grew day by day. At that time Brahmanism was trying to regain power from the Buddhists who were in power until then. Soon Buddhism was ousted from the land of its birth and forced to take refuge in the Far East. There were some pockets of Jainism, particularly around Gujarat. As such the Muslims came into contact mainly with Brahmanic Hinduism, which Mohammed Bin Qasim treated in the light of the Pact that the Prophet (pbuh) had made with the Christians of Najran. The classical Muslim historian, Al-Baladhuri, records in connection with Qasim's campaign in Sindh:

*Mohd. Bin Qasim reached the city of Raorhi situated on a hill top. He laid a siege and won the city without a battle with the assurance that neither there will be bloodshed nor Hindu places of worship will be touched. He considered Hindu places of worship as equal to the places of worship of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians. Then he clamped tax on them.*⁵

Mohammed Bin Qasim established a system of governance in Sindh based on the Islamic principles governing non-Muslims, which were characterised by religious tolerance and ensuring the human rights of the non-Muslims. Hamid-al-Kufi writes in Chach Nama:

*The victor of Sindh gave very high regard to religious tolerance. He got a fatwa from Damascus to the effect that Hindu temples enjoy the same status as the Christian or Jewish places of worship found in other provinces of the Caliphate. Brahmans were accorded all the rights that they enjoyed earlier. They were also appointed as revenue collection officers.*⁶

Mohammed Bin Qasim did not interfere in the religious affairs of Hindus. Traditional local courts (*panchayats*) were allowed to continue to decide civil cases as usual.⁸ There is also written evidence that the Arab victors never forced the people of Sindh to convert to Islam. Instead they were provided with all the privileges enjoyed by the *dhimmis* living in other Muslim lands.⁹

Moreover, the neighbourhoods that Muslims established were open, allowing no segregation on the basis of caste and untouchability, which was in stark contrast to what one found in Hindu neighbourhoods. This openness and equality had such a compelling attraction

that the local people could not resist it. Initial xenophobia gradually gave way to sympathy and misgivings started crumbling. Soon religious discussions started among Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, which had already begun in the court of the Abbasid Caliphs.¹⁰

These discussions found a more systematic intellectual articulation in Al-Biruni's (d.1050 CE) *Book of India*, which was the first serious attempt by an Arab to know and understand from close quarters the faith systems, religious traditions, philosophical postulates and socio-cultural expressions of India. Al-Biruni's researches and writings on India made sterling contributions in laying the foundations of the Hindu-Muslim dialogue that was to begin after the consolidation of Muslim rule in India.

Muslim rulers in India from the very beginning generally adopted an attitude of religious tolerance and coexistence towards their Hindu subjects. At the same time, the *ulama* (religious scholars) and *fuqaha* (experts of Islamic Law) too favoured that the Hindus should be accorded all the rights and freedoms that they were entitled to under the Islamic system. *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, an important work of Islamic jurisprudence, tells us about the status Hindus enjoyed during Muslim rule:

They have war drums, banners, things made of precious metals, golden robes and all the trappings of royalty. They have lands, employments and power in plenty and (Muslim Kings) allow it that Kafirs (non-believers), Mushriks (those who worship many gods) and idol-worshippers build their houses like palaces, don golden robes, use Arabian horses laden with golden and silver trappings and live in grandeur, enjoy all the comforts of life, have Muslims as servants and make them run ahead of their horses, with poor Muslims begging at their doors and calling them rai, rana, thakur, shah, mehta and pandit.¹¹

All the *fatawa* (Islamic legal decrees) of the period have clear statements about the religious grounds of Muslim-Hindu relations and status of the places of worship of non-Muslim *dhimmis* (protected subjects), guaranteeing their protection. *Fatawa-i Qara Khani* clearly replies in the negative to the query: should the places of worship of non-Muslims and *dhimmis* not be allowed to be built and protected under Islamic rule? Likewise to the related question: have Muslims a

right or not to pull down the places of worship of non-Muslims found in the lands which have come under Muslim rule?¹²

The Contribution of Sufis

Sufis promoted religious tolerance and interfaith understanding with utmost zeal, as they valued these things as articles of faith. With their love of the entire humankind, irrespective of creed, colour and race, the sufis spread the Islamic message of human unity and universal brotherhood in a way that touched people's hearts.

Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti laid the foundations of the Chishti Order of sufism in India. He evolved such a vocabulary and idiom of spreading the Islamic message that transformed an individual's life. He understood the Hindu mind as no-one else did and opened a dialogue with them accordingly.

Khwaja Nizamuddin Chishti of Delhi further extended the Chishti Order and became a great centre of human love and kindness. His *khanqah* attracted people of all religions who were treated with equality and without any discrimination. Amir Khusro, the closest disciple of Khwaja Nizamuddin and a great Persian poet, was a great lover of India and had a profound knowledge and understanding of the Hindu religion and culture. In his Persian *masnavi* (long poem) *Nuh Sipahr*, he writes about Hindus with great philosophical insight:

They believe in the unity of existence, absoluteness of the Reality and the life after death.

They believe God to be the Creator and Provider of all the intelligent and non-conscious and living beings. They believe God to be the creator of the good and evil and believe in His authority and His knowledge of things from the Beginning to the End.

Indians are much better than those who do not know God from His divine attributes. Dualists have split the oneness of Godhead into two but no Indian denies the oneness of God and His power of Creation.

Christians crafted the ideas of Jesus as son of God and that of the Holy Spirit.

Star-worshippers believe in seven gods but Hindus who know the essence of unity deny it.

Elementalists have faith in four gods but Hindus say that God is one.

Anthropomorphists believe in the manifestation of God but Indians are untainted by it.

Another group believes in the Light and Darkness as gods but Hindus do not subscribe to this faith.

Indians believe God to be True and without any parallel.

Although they worship stones, horses, sun, grass and plants but they do it only out of love and to fulfil a necessity.

They say that the Creator is God and these gods and goddesses are just His manifestations and images.

They worship gods and goddesses only for showing their loyalty to them.

We can see this ceaseless search for a firm ground of human oneness and such a common denominator among followers of different religions, which may serve as a basis for social, economic and cultural cooperation among them, running through the entire Islamic history as a current of light. This is the same search for religious understanding that we know as modern dialogue. If one looks at human history with objectivity and uncoloured eyes, one would come to the fact that it was Muslims who were the initiators of this dialogue and interface among various faiths and civilisations. It was because the global society that came into existence under the Abbasids dominated a substantial part of the world was unprecedented in human history. Muslims knew the importance of this globalism and tried to consolidate it by providing academic, philosophical and practical grounds for religious and civil understanding.

Shah Waliullah of Delhi (1703-1762), who was the most outstanding religious scholar of the Indian sub-continent in the 18th century, has discussed the idea of religious dialogue in his book *Al-Fauz al-Kabir*.

He tells us that *Ilm al-mujadila* (the science of disputation) is one of the five categories of knowledge covered in the Qur'an which presents the truth of Islamic faith through arguments.¹³ This *Ilm al-mujadila* has a close parallel in our modern religious dialogue. The Qur'an has continuously adopted the style of dialogue wherever there is an invitation to ponder on the truthfulness of the faith. The Qur'an enjoins upon the believers to employ the same style of dialogue while interacting with non-Muslims. The Holy Book commands the believers to: "Call men to the path of your Lord with wisdom and mild exhortation. Reason with them in the most courteous manner."¹⁴ This Qur'anic verse lays down the essential features of the Qur'anic way of invitation and dialogue where a mild and gentle language is used, which is based on reason and argument and where there is no effort to injure or damage the invitee's ego.

The Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1564-1605 CE) was another great seeker of interfaith togetherness with whom the tradition of religious dialogue touched a new high in medieval India. He not only promoted the idea of religious understanding but also institutionalised it by organising discussions among representatives of various faiths to arrive at a common ground of unity. The most important feature of Akbar's efforts was that he turned the process of religious dialogue into a public campaign.

The Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh took his grandfather's legacy to the utmost heights by making the idea of religious harmony into a personal experience which he expressed in his many original works and translations of Hindu scriptures.

In the 19th century, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of the famous M.A.O. College at Aligarh and a father figure of Muslim renaissance, made outstanding contributions to interfaith understanding. He wrote an introduction to the Bible, translated parts of it (Gen. 1-12 and Matt. 1-5) into Urdu, commented upon these texts and thus became a pioneer of Muslim-Christian dialogue in India.

Today Muslims are sharing life with the followers of different religions in many countries. Almost all pluralist societies today have Muslims as an inalienable part. Figures show that the Muslim population in

the world is about 1.5 billion which means that every fifth human being in the world is a Muslim. It also makes them the second largest religious group in the world. There are many Muslim states where non-Muslims live together with the Muslims. This situation calls upon the Muslims to become exemplars of the Islamic teachings about religious tolerance and coexistence.

The Contemporary Scenario of Religious Dialogue

We know that religious dialogue as a movement had its beginning in the 20th century but this movement caught public attention only during the sixth and seventh decades. In 1965, the Roman Catholic Church, through the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), introduced a change in its policy towards non-Christian faith traditions.

It is very heart-warming and promises that in a world where conflicts of various kinds are the order of the day, the religious quarters are advocating dialogue and coexistence amongst religions. The Muslim world has furthered the cause of religious dialogue by the active involvement of its political leadership in this process. In the last decade of the 20th century, when the theory of the clash of civilisations was widely published, Iranian President Mohammed Khatami took the lead in emphasising the importance of religious dialogue. The movement of dialogue among religions got another boost when in 2007 about 138 Islamic scholars and intellectuals, under the leadership of Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, issued an open letter and invitation for reconciliation to the Christian Church through the Common Word initiative (see: www.acommonword.com).

Common Word: A New Beginning

Pope Benedict, the head of the Catholic Church, during a lecture on 12 September 2006 at the University of Regensburg, Germany, quoted a Byzantine King's comment that Islam was a religion of violence. This comment provoked the entire Muslim world, which responded in large scale demonstrations the world over. But at the same time these words prompted the intellectual and academic circles in the Islamic world to think about taking a new initiative to remove misgivings about Islam and Muslims that afflict the Christian world. A lead in this direction was undoubtedly taken

by the Aal al-Bayt Trust under the guidance of Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad. On 13 October 2007, the Common Word invitation for a Muslim-Christian dialogue was issued.

After the Common Word

The Christian world, particularly the religious circles, unfortunately could not accept this common word initiative from Muslims with the warmth that was expected. The Christian response was mixed as certain hardcore fanatical Christian circles termed this sincere effort as a bundle of lies, while liberal Christian scholars like Christian W. Troll and John L. Esposito wholeheartedly welcomed it.

The Common Word initiative found the warmest response at Yale University in the U.S.A. where the Divinity School organised a conference to discuss the proposals of accord and reconciliation raised in the Common Word initiative. The conference also saw a document issued by a group of Christian religious scholars which called for strengthening the two proposals of the Common Word initiative – love of God and love of neighbour. The importance of this document lies in the fact that it was signed by about 300 eminent people belonging to different Christian traditions and it was published as a full page advertisement in the *New York Times*. As a follow up, Cambridge University (October 2008) and the University of Georgetown (March 2009) also organised conferences where positive views were presented with reference to the Common Word initiative.

This initiative received a shot in the arm when Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Shah Abdullah, came forward to involve itself in this campaign of promoting religious dialogue and promised to turn it into a movement.

Saudi involvement and patronage of the Common Word initiative is indeed one of its biggest achievements. Shah Abdullah kept his promise and invited eminent scholars and intellectuals belonging to various groups within Islam to a conference held under the aegis of the *Rabita 'Alam-e-Islami* at Mecca, the city of peace, in June 2008, to deliberate upon the possibilities of a thorough dialogue between Islam and other faiths. An important feature of the Mecca conference was that it also had representatives of the countries where Muslims

have practical experience of living with other religions as minorities. The role of Muslims in pluralist societies, with particular reference to India and Indonesia, was an important part of the agenda. Shah Abdullah organised another grand World Conference on Dialogue in Madrid, Spain in July 2008 to discuss various issues related to religious dialogue. Shah Abdullah said among other things in his inaugural address that:

Let our dialogue be a triumph of belief over disbelief, of virtue over vice, of justice over iniquity, of peace over conflicts and wars, and of human brotherhood over racism.

The Madrid conference had representatives of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, apart from Islam. Thus the involvement of Saudi Arabia in the process of religious dialogue has warmed up the expectation that the Muslim world will respond to it enthusiastically and the Muslim religious leadership will come forward to pursue this dialogue much more vigorously.

Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Problems and Obstacles

Muslim-Christian dialogue does not face such problems in India as it faces in the Muslim- and Christian-majority countries, primarily because both the Muslims and Christians are minorities and victims of Hindu religious chauvinism in India. But still there are certain problems and obstacles that need to be discussed and removed. One of the biggest obstacles in the religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians lies in the perceptions about the Lord Jesus Christ and the Prophet of Islam (pbuh). Muslims consider Jesus Christ a Prophet and revere him accordingly but most of the Christians still suffer from certain historical misgivings about the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Another problem consists in both Islam and Christianity being proselytising religions. Both want to enlarge their presence through religious propagation which creates tensions and impedes the process of dialogue.

Perceptions about the relationship between religion on the one hand and politics and political power on the other, is the third important point of conflict. Christianity has accepted the separation of Church

and State as a fact, while Muslims are not ready to accept this dualism and consider the Rightly-guided Caliphate as their model, although religion and politics have been independent of each other for the largest part of Islamic history.

The Christian world has achieved many freedoms, including that of expression, after a long and painful struggle against religious repression because of which they are not ready to give them up at any cost, whilst the Muslim world, because of an entirely different historical experience, finds itself against giving unlimited freedoms to the people. This also constitutes a great obstacle in the dialogue.

Conservative circles in both the religions are also creating problems in Muslim-Christian dialogue as they highlight contentious issues instead of concentrating on the points of accord and unity.

Towards a Future of Hope

Efforts so far made towards strengthening and intensifying the process of religious dialogue show that in spite of many forces working against it, the future of Muslim-Christian dialogue seems to be quite bright, as there are many more points of agreement than otherwise between the two great religious traditions. The Common Word initiative and the Mecca and Madrid Conferences point towards the fact that the process of dialogue has now got a firm ground upon which to grow. The way the religious and political leaderships in the Muslim world have joined hands to further the cause of dialogue is a potent indication that in countering the forces of clash and conflict among religions and civilisations, the religious leadership of different faiths would come forward with much more vigour and unity to intensify the process of dialogue at every level and force the political leadership to serve the cause of religious tolerance, coexistence and universal human brotherhood.

In India, though the tradition of religious interaction and dialogue is quite old and established, the process of religious dialogue, more particularly the Hindu-Muslim dialogue, is yet to find a coherent expression and a firm ground upon which to stand. The Hindu majority has not yet responded to the necessity of dialogue in the way and on the scale it demands. Small groups of different religious traditions are indeed engaged in this process at different levels but

these efforts are limited to conferences and seminars alone with practically no impact on the routine affairs of society. The process of dialogue has still not found a systematic academic articulation mainly because there is almost no institutional support for it. Academics who are engaged in this process largely remain confined to their private efforts and generally do not join the activists of dialogue. But there is still a great hope in India for religious dialogue to grow, as this country has been a pluralist society for centuries and the Indian people share a living experience of religious tolerance and coexistence.

- 1| Q. 7:19, 20:120.
All translations taken from: An English Translation of the meaning of the Qur'an, Lebanon: Dar Al-Choura Beirut, 1980.
- 2| Q. 2:30, 33.
- 3| Q. 7:172.
- 4| Q. 7:11, 17.
- 5| *Futuhul Buldaan, Al Badhuri, Cairo: Almatba al misriyya, 1937, p.424.*
- 6| *Kufi, Mohd. Ali bin Hamid Abu Bakr: Chach Nama, Delhi, 1939, p.208.*
- 7| *The Administration of the Sultanate of Delhi, Edited Volume, Karachi, 1959.*
- 8| *Ishwari Prasad: The History of Medieval India, Indian Press.*
- 9| *Futuhul Buldan, Al Baladhuri, op.cit.*
- 10| *Quraishi, Ishtiyag Husain: Barr-e-Azam Pak-o-Hind Ki Millat-e-Islamia, (Urdu) translated by Hilal Ahmad Zubairi, Karachi University, Karachi, Third edition, 1987, p.43.*
- 11| *Fataawa Jahandari, p.120-121, quoted in Nizami, Khaliq Ahmad: Salatin-e-Delhi Ke Mazhabi Rujhanaat (Urdu), Delhi: Nadvatal Musannifin, pp.77, 70.*
- 12| *Bhatti, Mohd. Ishaq: Barr-e-Saghir Pak-o-Hind Mein Ilm-e-Fiqh (Urdu), Lahore: Idara Saqafat-e-Islamiyya, 1972, pp.95, 97.*
- 13| *Waliullah, Shah: Al Fauzul Kabir fi Usulal Tafsir, Lucknow: Darul Uloom Nadvatul Ulema, 1987, p.27.*
- 14| Q. 16:125.