

The Qur'anic View of Interreligious Dialogue and Harmony

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Abstract: The Qur'an, being the revealed text, preaches love, tolerance and sympathy for others. Peace, security, co-existence and human dignity are the central teachings of the Qur'an. The promotion of interreligious harmony and peace is one of the key aspects of the Qur'anic teachings. Today, the Qur'anic teachings have been misunderstood and misinterpreted in various ways. This is mainly because of the ignorance about the core teachings of the Qur'an and also because of some Muslim-named people, who are involved with terrorist activities, trying to gain their own interests. The purpose of the present study is to examine the basic teachings of the Qur'an regarding interreligious harmony through interreligious dialogue. It includes the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as a burning example of interreligious peace and harmony.

Keywords: The Qur'an, interreligious dialogue, harmony, monotheistic religion, charter of Madinah, People of the Book.

1. INTRODUCTION

This is undoubtedly proved that we, the people of different religions, are indeed citizens of one planet, the earth. The earth is one and religions are many. In the past, people could live in isolation and ignore each other. Today, they can no longer live in isolation. They are bound to live in a Global Village. There are also enumerable races and nations throughout the world. Though the religions of the world preach love, tolerance and sympathy for other human beings, the followers are divided into conflicts, hatred and enmity. In this circumstance, a peaceful society cannot be established unless the people of different religions come closer and try to know each other. This can be achieved through a constant dialogue between the followers of one religion and another.

Now, the question arises: what is meant by dialogue. Dialogue is a conversation between two or more persons on a common subject with differing views (Swidler, 1983). Interreligious dialogue refers to mutual, cooperative, and positive relations among the people of different religions. It is also a way to meet people themselves through which they can get to know their religious beliefs and practices. F.C. Arinze (1990:162) remarks in this regard: "Interreligious dialogue is a meeting of heart and mind between followers of various religions. It is communication between two believers at the religious level. It is a walking together towards truth and working together in projects of common concern."

The purpose of interreligious dialogue is to get the people of different religions together and make a unique contribution to the common cause of interreligious cooperation and co-existence. It expects a mutual understanding and not competition with each other. Musser, D. and Sunderland, D. (2005:1) remark: "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions". The Qur'anic attribute of God 'Rabbul-alamain' explicitly shows that all people of the world are one and the same in the eye of Allah Who takes equal care of and merciful to all of them. There are certain verses in the Qur'an which put clear

emphasis on the unity of all mankind. For example, “O Mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread a multitude of men and women” (Ali, 2000, The Holy Qur’an, 4:1).

2. BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND HARMONY

The history of dialogue is as old as the religions since man and women have always made an effort to understand themselves. History records many examples of such initiatives of interreligious dialogue from the ancient period to the present.

The tenure of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) as the ruler of Medina is an explicit example of peace, solidarity and interfaith harmony. The Prophet made a constitution for the state of Madina after discussing with its residents who were Muslims, Jews, Christians, Polytheists and others not affiliated with any religion (Akram Diya al-Umari, 1995). “The Charter of Madinah was, indeed, the first written and modern constitution of the world. The Charter laid the foundation of a pluralistic and tolerant polity in a somewhat a cephalous socio-polity of Madinah. In the pluralistic society and polity of Madinah comprising 4500 majority Jews, 4000 pagans, and 1500 Muslims (of both Makkah and Madinan origin) the prophet provided an empirical example of how Muslims should deal with people of other faith. For a decade from 622 to 632, he led this composite community in an environment of what may be termed in contemporary parlance good government” (Husain, 2009).

Muslim Spain (711-1492) especially during the Andalusian Umayyad dynasty (756-1031) is a great example of religious pluralism. Three great monotheistic religions, Islam, Judaism and Christianity were practiced side by side in Muslim Spain. It is sometimes described as a golden age of religious and ethnic tolerance and interfaith harmony between Muslims, Christians and Jews (Courbage & Philippe, 1998:35-36). Another example of harmonious relationship among the people of different faiths was found under the rule of ottoman Turks from 15th o 19th centuries where Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together in harmony throughout the period except a few incidents. The emperor Akbar also showed most tolerance toward the followers other religions in India during his rule from 1556-1605.

The beginning of today’s interreligious dialogue is an indication of the first World’s Parliament of Religion at Chicago in 1983. It is considered as the first formal gathering to make a dialogue among the people of different faiths worldwide. Today, a number of national and international seminars, conferences and workshops are held on interreligious dialogue throughout the world. Global interreligious organizations such as “Religions for Peace”, Parliament of the World’s Religions” and “United Religions Initiative” have strengthened dialogue among the leaders of diverse faiths to promote a just, peaceful and sustainable world (Rozario, 2011-65). On October 13, 2007 Muslims expanded this very message of interreligious harmony. 138 Muslim scholars and intellectuals unanimously came together for the first time to discuss common ground between Islam and Christianity. In July 2008, around 300 delegates from Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism attended the Global Interfaith Dialogue Conference in Madrid to solve world problem through harmonious dialogue. It urged the United Nations General Assembly to support its recommendations and called for a special UN session on dialogue (Madrid Conference, 2008).

3. THE QUR’ANIC VIEW OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND HARMONY

The Qur’an is perhaps the only scripture which has spoken of other religions and their prophets very positively. The Qur’an always encourages mankind to know and respect one another irrespective of their tribes, nations and religions. The Qur’an says in this regard: “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into and nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)” (49:13). The Qur’an also urges Muslims to show the best of manners and wisdom when speaking to the people of other faiths: “Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious; for thy Lord knoweth best, who have stayed from His path and who receive guidance” (Qur’an, 16:125). The core of dialogue is wisdom and beautiful words which is explicitly described here.

According to the teachings of the Qur’an, there was not one particular law for all humanity. Allah has given a lawgiver for each community and there were different laws for different communities. The Qur’an states:” To every People We

appointed rites and ceremonies which they must follow: let them not then dispute with thee on the matter, but do thou invite (them) to thy Lord: for thou art assuredly on the Right Way” (22:67). To have faith in all the Prophets sent by Allah is one of the fundamental beliefs of Islam. The Qur’an says: “To every People there was a Messenger” (10:47). It has been made clear by another verse which says: “Verily We have sent thee in truth, as a bearer of Glad Tidings, and as a Warner: and there never was a People, without a Warner having lived among them (in the past)” (35:24). There is a common tradition which says that Allah has sent 124000 prophets on earth. In the Qur’an the names of twenty- seven prophets are mentioned except Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) (Waker, 2002:218). There were also many other prophets whom were not mentioned in the Qur’an. It says: “Of some Messengers We have already told thee the story; of others We have not – and to Moses Allah spoke direct” (4:164). The Qur’an always tells to accept all the revealed books given by Allah. Further, it also warns of punishment who has denied the Message of Allah. The Qur’an says: “O ye believe! Believe in Allah and His Messenger, and the scripture which He hath sent to His Messenger and the scripture which He sent to those before (him). Any who denieth Allah, His Messengers, and the Day of Judgment, hath gone far, far astray” (4:136). The Qur’an also teaches that the authenticity of every prophet’s message enjoys the same status. The equality of the messages of all the prophets is defined in the following verse where the prophets are asked to declare that “Say: ‘We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in (the Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets, from their Lord: we make no distinction between one and another among them, and to Allah do we bow our will (in Islam)” (3:84). There may be a question of Divine revelation given to all prophets and which is also the basis of unity among all religions. The Qur’an has answered in this regard: “Say: ‘O People of the Book! Come to common terms between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah. If then they turn back, say ye: ‘Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah’s Will)” (3:64). The Qur’an only rejects those who believe in polytheism. It is also clear that the Qur’an did never advocate the persecution of polytheists. The Qur’an says in this regard: “Say: O ye that reject Faith! I worship not that which ye worship, Nor will ye worship that which I worship....To you be your way, and to me mine.” (109:1-6). These verses make it clear that the Qur’an neither permit assaulting the polytheists nor plundering their properties. They have also the same right to be protected as those of the believers in Islam.

There are many things common in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Qur’an also admires Moses, Jesus and other Biblical Prophets. The Qur’an says: “They say: Become Jews or Christians if ye would be guided (to salvation).’ Say thou: ‘Nay! (I would rather) the Religion of Abraham the True, and he joined not gods with Allah” (2:135). Even the Qur’anic explanation makes it clear that Prophet Abraham was also a Muslim. For example, “Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in Faith, and bowed his will to Allah’s (which is Islam), and he joined not gods with Allah” (3:67). Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself put the Qur’anic teachings into practice in his life on earth. He used to visit the sick although they were polytheists. His attitude toward the followers of other faiths was always liberal. He did not compel non-Muslim citizens living in the state of Madinah to be ruled by Islamic laws. The charter of Madinah given by Prophet expressly mentions that people belonging to different religions would be decided on the basis of their own traditions. According to this charter, non-Muslims have equal rights to be judged by their own religions as Muslims to Islamic tradition (Le Bon, 1974).

4. CONCLUSION

The above discussion makes it clear that dialogue among religions is a vital requisite for the establishment of a peaceful society on earth. The Qur’an is the most suitable scripture in case of giving importance on the equal rights to the followers of different religions. The Qur’an traces the common grounds between Islam and other religions in such a way that we can make a bridge between one religion and another. The Quranic verse “And do not argue with the followers of the Book except by what is best, save with those of them who act unjustly, and say: we believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is one, and to Him we submit” (29:46) is a clear message of interreligious dialogue and harmony. The Prophet’s rule in Madinah especially the charter of Madinah is a great example of interreligious harmony.

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