

Experiences and Manifestations of Interfaith Dialogue: Some Insights from the Life of Prophet Mohammad (S.A.A.S)

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ABSTRACT

The question of the *dialogue* and *inter-faith dialogue* is becoming a central concept in the contemporary philosophical and post-modern era. Although the problem of understanding and experiencing of other has been contemplated long ago but after the Second World War, the nature of thought and philosophy has taken the question of *other* seriously. The holocaust in Germany was another factor, which brought the issues of *other* and *dialogue*. Now the world is so inter-dependent and so inter-related. Dialogue has become an imperative. It is understood as meeting and communicating with each other faiths, sharing thoughts, exchanging views, reaching mutual understanding and respect through focusing on common ground. The future of world depends on peace. Interfaith dialogue is indispensable to peace and tranquility globally within the context of religious pluralism.

In the essence of *Orientalism* (Edward Said), Islam has been misinterpreted to imply that there is no room for dialogue in Islam and that Muslims cannot coexist peacefully with the people of other faiths. This has not only projected a fanatic image of Islam in the world especially in the West but has also widened the gulf between the Muslim and non-Muslim world. From the dialogical perspective, Islam provides the path to mankind for constructing a peaceful place to live and also bridges the gulf between different world views.

The life of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.S) is a quintessential life of co-operation, reconciliation, tolerance and acceptance of pluralism. The Prophet's (S.A.A.S) life was spent in dialogue with atheists, idolaters and People of the Book. Treaties, friendly relations and commercial partnerships are all facets of this dialogue. The Prophet's (S.A.A.S) relationships with the people of other faiths, in his life in Mecca and Medina, as a model can guide us to illuminate our present. The study examines how prophet's life offers us a way to engage in ongoing dialogue and cooperation with the people of other faiths and coexist successfully with all those with whom we share the world.

Keywords: *Interfaith Dialogue, Orientalism, Cooperation, Prophet Mohammad (S.A.A.S)*

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1. Introduction

The question of the *other*, *identity* and *dialogue* has emerged as a central concept in the contemporary philosophical era. Although the problem of understanding and experiencing of *other* has been contemplated long ago but after the Second World War, the nature of thought and philosophy has taken the question of *other* seriously. The holocaust in Germany was another factor, which brought forth the issues of *other* and *identity*. Post-modern thinker Mark Taylor says, 'philosophy begins and ends with the question of the other. The question of the other is not, of course, a question; it is a complex of questions. In one of its earliest and most recurrent forms, the problem of the other has been posed in terms of the relationship between the one and the many, or unity and plurality. In the modern period, the problem of the one and many has taken the form of the correlative questions of the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, and the interrelation of identity and difference.'¹

The colonialists tried to suppress and depress the others (native of the colonies) for their self-interest as analyzed by Frantz Fanon, 'colonization is not satisfied merely with holding people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it'.²The concept of objectification/other is very significant to understand the nature of *Inter-faith*. That is a process where the other could be understood

profoundly. It unfolds the conceptions of human-psyche and the understandings of self and other. In this perspective, cognitions of the relationship between self and other are very important. The identity of self cannot be imagined without *other*.

In this post modern era, the world is progressively becoming a global village and different faiths, communities are forced, more than ever before, to come closer and closer. Globalization disperses people and ideas throughout the world; it brings families, individuals with different beliefs into close contact. In this globalized world it becomes the need of every individual, society, community, and religion to find out the foundations for peaceful co-existence.

On the other hand, in the essence of *Orientalism* as Palestinian thinker Edward Said exposes the strategy of European mind towards the wrong interpretation of non-European countries. So, there is a need to rethink both sides. The scholars of Islamic studies have to work hard in both positions, one is that, they have to reinterpret Islam in right way and second they have to participate in inter-faith dialogue. No doubt, Islam has been misinterpreted to imply that there is no room for dialogue in Islam and that Muslims cannot coexist peacefully with the people of other faiths. This has not only projected a fanatic image of Islam in the world especially in the West but has also widened the gulf between the Muslim and non-Muslim world. If Muslims want to bridge the gaps they need to remove the misconceptions in the minds of people of other faiths, regarding issues related to *Shariah* such as relations with non-Muslims. In the above said position, there is a big thrust to understand the way of interfaith dialogue. For this, here, I shall focus my paper on the life of Prophet Mohammad (S.A.A.S)

2. Concept of Interfaith Dialogue:

Dialogue is a bridge building effort to promote respect, tolerance and peaceful living. It is not designed to create a civil religion, but to create an atmosphere of respect for each religion and faith. Interfaith dialogue means a conversation between different individuals or groups whose purpose is simply honest engagement and increased mutual understanding. Dialogue between followers of different faiths gives them the opportunity to talk to and listen to each other, getting to know and learning to understand the 'other'. Dialogue is not debate; it is not about convincing others of one's position, or trying to win an argument. Nor is it about compromise. Dialogue is simply about honest engagement and communication, in which we try to better understand the other, whatever the differences in our beliefs and values, by helping others to better understand who we are and what we stand for. Interreligious dialogue is often viewed skeptically with concerns regarding its true intentions. In addition to realizing its potential for enabling conversion, it is also seen as an attempt to create an ecumenical faith, or blend of religions. On the contrary, interfaith dialogue may be seen as an opportunity to explore one's own faith as well as that of another religion. Because conversion is not generally the intent, entering into interreligious dialogue with a strong understanding of personal interpretations of religious beliefs are useful. Scholars promote *intrafaith* dialogue as a method to further personal understandings of one's own religion and religious beliefs before engaging in *interfaith* dialogue, with members of shared beliefs continuing to meet throughout interfaith dialogue encounters.

Ataullah Sissiqui says, "The major area of dialogue is about mutual understanding and communication."³ The purpose of interfaith dialogue is not to create a new religion or to give up on the fundamentals of Islam, but to create a peaceful atmosphere for coexistence.⁴

3. Islamic method of dialogue

Islam is its own way of life and the complete code of conduct. It is preserved to this day, in its pristine purity in the form of the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* of the last messenger Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.S). In the field of dialogue, it provides the way to mankind by which the world will become peaceful place to live. Islam lays much emphasis on argumentation and dialogue. It has also stipulated that dialogue should be conducted in the best possible manner and based on good argument.

As in the *Quran*:

*Invite (all) to the way of your Lord by wisdom and beautiful preaching and argue with them graciously for your Lord knows best who have strayed from His path and who receives guidance.*⁵

Also Allah says in the *Quran*,

*And do not argue with the people of the Book (Christian & Jews) except in the best Manner*⁶

It means that dialogue must be done in the most courteous manner.

The Qur'an also says,

*Say: 'O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between you and us: That we worship none but Allah, that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not from ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah, if they turn back, say ye: Bear witness that we (at least are Muslims (bowing to Allah's will)).'*⁷

Thus, the *Quran* did not want Muslims to be aggressive at all. For *mujadilah* (mutual arguments) *Quran* lays much emphasis on the commonalities between one religion and the other rather than differences especially when followers of earlier revelations are to be addressed by Muslims. In other words the similarities need to be highlighted rather than dissimilarities.

4. The Life of Prophet (S.A.A.S) and Inter Faith Dialogue:

The Prophet (S.A.A.S) carried out the Quranic command in letter and spirit. The Prophet (S.A.A.S) did not bring up points of conflict in his interactions with People of the Book, did not enter into combative debates with them and sought engagement with them through the Medina Charter and political and military treaties such as Hudaibiyah and Khaybar. During the time of Prophet (S.A.A.S), there were Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, polytheists, and others not affiliated with any religion. The Prophet (S.A.A.S) who founded the classless and universal society of Islam actually brought various nations together and removed their tribal prejudices, The Holy prophet (S.A.A.S) said:

“Peoples are like teeth of a com.”⁸

“All mankind is Allah's family; the best among you in the sight of Allah is he who is human towards his family.”⁹

He (S.A.A.S) also said,

“You are children of Adam and Adam was created out of clay.”¹⁰

After Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.S) received his revelations, he started spreading his message with dialogue and argument. He began to speak about them publicly, first to his own family and then to other people. The life of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.S) is a classic example of cooperation, reconciliation, tolerance, acceptance of pluralism, love of humanity and upholding human equality-irrespective of caste, creed and of color. The *Half-al-Fazool* is one of the greatest events which indicate that Prophet (S.A.A.S) tried to reach out to the people of other faiths and build bridges on the basis of compassion and fellow feeling. The Prophet's (S.A.A.S) life was spent in dialogue with atheists, idolaters and People of the Book. Treaties, friendly relations and commercial partnerships are all facets of this dialogue.

5. Prophet's (S.A.A.S) advice to Jaafar bin Abi Talib (R.A)

When the Muslims suffered severe persecution and torment at the hands of Meccan idolaters in the early period of Islam, Prophet (S.A.A.S) suggested them that they should temporarily migrate to Abyssinia. The Prophet (S.A.A.S) explained his preference for Abyssinia as follows:

‘There is a king who loves justice and in whose territories nobody is oppressed.’¹¹

This piece of advice certifies the acceptance of other people and faiths. Praise of the Christian King in such a way shows unbiased and unprejudiced attitude towards people of other faiths. It also shows that to reveal and convey its point of view, Islam adopts the way of dialogue and debate for all the religions, and especially for the People of the Book (*Ahl al kitab*). As we read in the Holy Quran

*Say: O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah. That we associate no partners with Him*¹²

Muslim theologians declare this verse of Quran as the foundation of Muslim-Christian dialogue. A famous Scholar Moulana Ameen Ahsan Islahi says about this verse of Surah Ale-Imran that the common thing between Muslims and People of the book is the Tawhid, and it is the basic thing for dawah.¹³

6. Treaty of Madinah:

In Makkah, Prophet Muhammad's (S.A.A.S) opponents were violent and made any form of dialogue impossible. Therefore, Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.S) had to leave Makkah for another city with better grounds for dialogue. The new city, Madinah, was inhabited by various tribes including Jews and Christians and the first thing he (S.A.A.S) did was to recognize the right of peaceful existence for the followers of all religions. The Medina Charter is an agreement that the Prophet (S.A.A.S) brokered between the Muslims and various Jewish and polytheistic tribes of Medina. The Charter is a social contract that is not based on blood, language, religion, race or class distinctions and it shows that differences in faith do not constitute an obstacle to living together. The Charter, by

which the Prophet (S.A.A.S) is accepted as a leader and which serves as the constitution of the Medina city-state, is characterized by pluralism and freedom, quite different from the nation-state model which is built around a racial and linguistic community. It lays down the principle of mutual responsibility of the parties. It was an important step towards making Medina, which had a chaotic tribal system before the Hijra (the emigration from Mecca to Medina), a more livable place. The Charter document regulates relations between different *groups* in a mixed society of Muslims, idolaters and Jews. Rising above Arab tribalism, Muhammad (S.A.W) created an intentionally pluralistic and inclusive community grounded in social justice and forgiveness that sought to resolve conflict by peaceful means. He (S.A.A.S) sought to heal the wounds of the past by forging a new Arab identity based on submission to God. Among contemporary Muslims, the *Yathrib* community of Muhammad's time serves as the paradigm or model for faith-based societies. Esposito says, "Religiously, Islam proved a more tolerant religion, providing greater religious freedom for Jews and indigenous Christians."¹⁴ As per Maulana Wahiduddin's view, Islam believes in peace, in tolerance and in love, all the human values are Islamic values. "When the Prophet (S.A.A.S) of Islam was in Madinah, so what happened that one day the Prophet (S.A.A.S) saw funeral procession passing through street in Madinah? Prophet (S.A.A.S) was seated at that time. On seeing the funeral he stood up in respect, one of his companions said that oh Prophet (S.A.A.S) it was funeral of a Jew, it was funeral of a non-Muslim. Prophet (S.A.A.S) said was he not a human being?" It means the Prophet (S.A.A.S) was able to discover a commonality between himself and that non-Muslim, that Jew.¹⁵

7. Delegation of the Christians of Najran:

Most of the Muslim scholars say that incident of *Delegation of Najran* is the first regular interlink and dialogue between Muslims and Christians. According to the Islamic sources, the Christians of Najran came to inquire some questions from the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.S) in 9th Hijrah after conquest of *Makkah*. When the Christian delegation reached in *Madinah* they asked some questions to the Holy Prophet (S.A.A.S) and the Holy Prophet (S.A.A.S) asked some questions to them so in this way they understood mutual point of view. The Holy Prophet (S.A.A.S) asked them some questions. He said: "Your assertion is that God has a son, you worship the cross and yours eating pork hold you back from submission."¹⁶ In this way the two groups have presented their point of view and understood it, because the dialogue is the best way to understand each other and to communicate each other. We also find religious diversity from this incident because after the conversation the two parties had made an agreement and this agreement remained when the Muslims became ruler. As a Christian writer A. Guillaume says, "The best possible treaty between Christians and the Prophet after the conversation under the circumstances."¹⁷ In fact Islam gives right of existence to other religions because there is no compulsion in Islam. So, this incident also provides us a good principle of mutual understanding and communication and we can implement it in the modern age.

The Prophet Mohammad (S.A.A.S) himself meted out a kind and gentle treatment to non-Muslims not only in the early years of his Prophet hood, but also in the later years at the height of his power. Here it will suffice to mention that the way he treated the delegation of the Christians of Najran has no parallel in the history of other conquerors. He not only played host to them and lodged them in the prophetic Masjid at Madinah, but also permitted them to offer prayers on Christian lines in the same masjid.¹⁸

According to Christian Scholar Jan Slop, "when the Prophet's companion objected to the fact that *Najranies* pray in the Mosque in Medina, Muhammad (S.A.A.S) told them not to hinder them but to leave them alone."¹⁹

8. Treaty of Hudaibiyah:

The treaty of Hudaibiyah is a proof of Prophet's desire for peaceful co existence with the people irrespective of their religion or cultural association. Prophet (S.A.A.S) preferred peace even at the cost of annoying some of his close friends. He knew that peaceful living would allow Muslims to dialogue with non-Muslims, move about freely and build relations with other tribes. This treaty is an excellent example of going the extra mile with others to achieve peace. The Prophet (S.A.A.S) said: "Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on non-Muslim minority, or curtails his rights, or burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I (Prophet Muhammad) will complain against that person on the Day of Judgment."²⁰

9. Misinterpretation of Islam:

Today many verses from Quran are being highlighted out of context, by many scholars, in which friendship between Muslims and the people of the book is prohibited and forbidden, for example Hud 11:113, Al Imran 3 :28, Al Mumtahina 60 :1, Al Mujadila 58:22. They have tried to prove that therefore any relations leading to cooperation with non-Muslims is not allowed. Muslims cannot co exist peacefully, leading to misunderstanding and strife in today's world. Egyptian Scholar Rashid Raza writes that the verses related to not having close friendship with Jews was only applicable to Jews of those time who acted against Islam and not to all Jews in general.

Therefore, in those days, considering the situation, it was forbidden to seek help in certain matters where secrecy was required. Later on, times changed and Jews became supporters of Muslims. In the conquest of Spain the Jews were on the side of Muslims not Christians.²¹ All verses related to the prohibition of relationship, trust and cooperation with non-Muslims apply only if it is certain that they can bring damage to Islam and Muslims. If it is contrary to this, then taking help from them, having friendships and educational and scientific cooperation, delegating responsibilities is lawful and legal.

10. Summing Up:

In this modern age, world has become a globalized village. By new inventions and discoveries in the field of communication and aviation people have started living together. Multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies are prevailing in the whole world. Secular values are increasing day by day and moral values are getting weaker. A state of peacelessness is there. Contemporary man is living in chaos and confusion. The modern age has already brought various factors of disunity among the people of the world. In the present scenario need is direly felt that man must be reunited. For this the best way is dialogue. Proponents of interfaith dialogue claim that, in an increasingly global world, interfaith dialogue can facilitate mutual understanding, respect for other religions, and, thus, the peaceful coexistence of people of different faiths. Islam means peace and its faith in oneness of God means it makes no difference and observes no discrimination or distinction between human beings on any basis. Indeed it insists that differences between human beings are expression of the will of God and must be respected by ensuring justice and human rights in equal measure to Muslims and non-Muslims. The proof, if it be required is there in the treaties and agreements that the Prophet (S.A.A.S) concluded with his adversaries in Madinah. The Islamic state that he set up in Madinah is Prototype of Islam's recognition and respect for plural society, the pacts he (S.A.A.S) made reveal his magnanimity and his insight into human character, but more important is the tenacity of purpose and sincerity with which he adhered to the pacts concluded by him. The charter with the Christians was scrupulously enforced and the upholding of the peace of Hudaibiyah, may well serve as models to prevent war among nations. One has to differentiate between Islam and Muslims. One has to judge Muslims in the light of Islamic teachings and not vice-versa. There is a *Hadith* which means a true Muslim is one by whose hands and tongue people are safe. It means that a Muslim is a true Muslim is peaceful member of society, harmless member of the society, no problem member of the society. So every Muslim must be well wisher to the society. This is the true picture of Islam, even the word Islam means peace. The root word of Islam is 'Silm,' *Silm* means peace, so Islam means religion of peace. So this is the true picture of Islam. In the multiethnic, multicultural and multi religious societies, it is obligatory for every Muslim to invite the non-Muslims towards the path of salvation i.e. Islam. But if the non-Muslims are not convinced and they don't accept Islam as their way of life, then it becomes important for both Muslims and non-Muslims to encourage the process of dialogue so that each individual may live in peace.

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