

Dialogue Initiative between Islam and West

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Abstract- Historically Islam has been in conflict with the west since 8th century. The Arabs were in Spain for 700 years and Sicily for 500 years. Then there were about two hundred years of so-called crusades. Some centuries latter Ottomans threatened to overran Europe, making their way to Vienna. The colonial movements of the west in Muslim lands and the Muslim reaction to get political independence from France, Russia, Britain, and Holland etc also created the conflict between the West and Muslims. Hence, the animosity is deep rooted into the minds of both westerners and Muslims. The two communities are caught up in a whirlpool of violence. I consider the dialogue between Islam and West, a work of immense importance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Islam as is defined is a religion which demands and propagates peace and co-existence. It is true that there are so many questions posed by the non-Muslims to its credibility of being a peaceful religion. It is also true that Islam receives a very bad connotation to its name and teachings. Is this the fact that there are Muslims who practice Islam in a bad way, is not authentic. What needs to be explained is why the world does not seem to make a distinction between the minority who are not willing to live peacefully and the majority of law-abiding religious citizens.

Syed Farid Alatas speaks about the three major reasons of clash and impediments for dialogue between Islam and West:

1. Historically Islam had been in conflict with the west since 8th century. The Arabs were in Spain for 700 years and Sicily for 500 years. Then there were about two hundred years of so-called crusades. Some centuries latter Ottomans threatened to overran Europe, making their way to Vienna. The colonial movements of the west in Muslim lands and the Muslim reaction to get political independence from France, Russia, Britain, and Holland etc also created the conflict between the West and Muslims. Hence, the animosity is deep rooted into the minds of both westerners and Muslims.
2. The attack on twin towers on 9/11 and its repercussions.
3. The orientalist construction of Islam that has been constructed for centuries also maligned the spirit of dialogue between Islam and West¹.

These major issues need intense care and redressal from both political and other think tanks, if we have to approach for a dialogue. Moreover, syllabus and curriculum in the schools should be dialogue and cooperation oriented. Students must be taught the positive impacts of the relations between Christianity and Islam, like crusades resulted in a cultural exchange between

Muslims and Christians. The bias of Orientlist's and Muslims for one another in academic circles must go, because due to their wrong preconceived notions of past they are not able to add to knowledge in a positive way which could eventually lead to the development of civilisations.

II. INITIATIVES TOWARDS DIALOGUE

1. Media should be involved in dialogue.

Media must come in the process of dialogue, which has also maligned the Islam to a great degree. Media pays a very little attention on the positive aspects of Muslim world. There are equally strange and bizarre things that happen within other religions, like as Syed Farid says, "Jamestown mass suicide was not attributed to the Christianity", little attention paid on how Muslims suffer out of the transgressions of their own men like "Muslim victims of 9/11" and "in 1995 Oklahoma city bombing was carried by an American Anglo but at very first Muslims were blamed". There is need for a better media reporting which covers all the suffering in the world, co-operation between Muslims and non-Muslims and non-Muslims must understand the biased and stereotype scholarship concentrated on Islamic Studies².

Islam does not allow any misinformation to be carried out without proof. Quran says (2:111) "Produce the proof if you are truthful"

The proof of the news should be the priority to avoid the confusion of Islam. Media has bombarded a lot of misinformation regarding the Islam till now. There must be a dialogue between the Islamic Scholars and World Media.

2. Developing metaphysical commonalities between Christianity and Islam

In order to better understand the surrogate character and the ideological nature of many of the confrontations described above, we should briefly reflect on the undeniable similarities between Islam and Christianity that could be the basis for an enlightened dialogue between the two civilisations in the theological, cultural and political fields. It is commonplace that both civilisations are based on the belief in one god. Monotheism is the quintessence of their religious attitude towards the universe. The concept of 'oneness' of God is more precisely and with higher abstraction expressed in Islam while the Christian concept may be seen as containing relics of polytheism in its Trinitarian conception of God. The Islamic concept of God may help Christianity to clarify its own conception of monotheism and to critically evaluate any anthropomorphic elements in its dogma of the trinity of the one God. Furthermore, both religions are of a universal nature and therefore open to all mankind. Their concept of God is not one of a tribal god; it excludes any form of

discrimination in regard to membership in the community of believers. This universality of their message may constitute a rivalry between the two religions, reaching out to all mankind, but at the same time it underlines their open-mindedness towards all creeds of humanity. A special binding factor in the field of theology is the eminent role which Islam attributes to Jesus among all the prophets. The Christian beliefs in the 'Immaculate Conception' and in Jesus being without sin are equally upheld by Islam. (The main difference, however, remains as to Jesus being regarded as the son of God or merely as a prophet, albeit the most noble among them all.) Similar conceptions exist in both religions in regard to the Resurrection and the Final Judgment.

These "structural" similarities of the metaphysical dogma, however, have not become the basis for a genuine dialogue between the two religions. For Christianity in particular, dogmatic differences have been more important and the Prophet's labeling as "heretic" has poisoned the relations between the communities over the centuries. A lack of confidence, even deep mistrust has prevailed between the two communities, which may partly be seen as a result of hundreds of years of armed confrontation in Europe and the Near East. A hostile prejudice against Islam still characterizes many European approaches to questions of the Muslim world, its religious dogma, its social rules, lifestyle, etc. As the Austrian-born Pakistani thinker Muhammad Asad rightly stated, Europe identified the political and military threats posed by the Muslim powers of the time -- particularly the threat of the Ottoman Empire -- with Islam as such, i.e. with the religious message of the Prophet³.

3. Orientalist must shun the bias towards Islam.

Another obstacle to genuine understanding and dialogue was constituted by the fact that for a very long time research on Islam was in the hands of Christian missionaries who dealt with the subject in an apologetic and highly polemical manner. This created a strangely distorted image of Islam in its religious, moral and social aspects as well. Such a doctrinal position, in turn, has had a profoundly negative impact on the popular European perception of Islam up to the present day. What today is known as "orientalism" has its roots in this apologetic Christian approach which put the Christian doctrine in a position of superiority over the pretended Islamic "heresy". As aptly stated by Edward Said,

Orientalism depends for its strategy on a positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand⁴.

This kind of approach is one of the major obstacles to an understanding between Muslims and Christians at present.

This approach completely fails to critically analyze the existing stereotypes as a legacy of earlier confrontations; on the contrary: it strengthens those stereotypes in the new set-up of a "clash of civilisations" according to which Islam is portrayed as a threat to the security of Europe and to the preservation of its cherished "liberal" lifestyle and value system. Orientalism, the profession of "Islamic Studies", is in many respects part of a new "crusade" under the Eurocentric conditions of the 20th century.

One of those stereotypes affecting Islamic-Christian relations since the times of the crusades and the wars with the Ottoman Empire has been that of the hostile nature of Islam in

both its religious and political message. This stereotype revolves around the Christian interpretation of the Quranic term *jihād* and may serve as an example of the work still to be done to prepare for a fair and balanced interpretation and representation of the Islamic message in Europe. Christian scholars used to teach that Islam generally and unreservedly justifies war against non-believers, i.e. Christians themselves. Certain sentences of the Qur'an were and still are deliberately taken out of context so as to "prove" an aggressive nature of Islam. Interpretation of Quran and other scriptures according to the context and background. The misinterpretation of the use of force in the teachings of the Qur'an is one basic example of an Islamic-Christian misunderstanding that has created an atmosphere of deep mistrust prolonging the wrongful perception of Islam as being a threat to Christian civilisation in Europe and negating its very right of existence.

4. Developed Countries should first approach for dialogue

The dialogue against the clash is of dire need because the way we find ourselves, as human beings, is violent and globally insecure. Our current approach to dialogue is dysfunctional. Clash is actually the interest of very few among the needs of many. Many want dialogue and peace and co-existence. Clash can never help us to reach the Just ends. The developed nations of the world should play an upper hand in acquiring that kind of atmosphere. It is very well said by the Dianna Francis, a member of IFOR (International Fellowship on Reconciliation):

If the rich nations put half of the effort into justice that they currently put into defending vested interests; if they stopped talking about the 'debts' of others and started to seek forgiveness and make reparation for their own indebtedness...if they began behaving democratically in world forums rather than trying to force other countries to line up with them through bribing and bullying, relationships would be transformed and the world would rapidly become more secure...⁵

She further says that if the big powers applied the approaches and procedures of conflict and resolution for the maintenance of the relationship, the face of international politics would be transformed to the extent that people would be more talking about the peace rather the clash. The mentality and ideology of the people must go through debates and discussions. This can be done from the beginning, at the very inception of the child. The debates in schools should be the priority of the teachers and the authorities who frame the syllabus of schools. The government should frame policies for the inter-religious debates.

5. Conferences on Dialogue among religions should be held

On 24, November 1919 an All India Khilafat Conference was held in Delhi to discuss the 'peace celebrations' of the British at the end of the Great War. The conference became a display of hind-Muslim fraternity. Gandhi presided and spoke in Urdu. His first sentences translated by MJ Akbar as;

It ought not to appear strange for the Hindus to be on the same platform as the Muslims in a matter that specifically and solely affects the Muslims. After all the test of true friendship is true assistance in adversity and whatever we are, Hindus, Parsis, Christians, Jews, if we wish to live as one nation, surely the interest of any of us must be the interest of all...We talk of

Hindu-Muslim unity. It would be an empty phrase if the Hindus hold aloof from the Muslims when their vital interest were at stake⁶.

However, such initiatives could not stop the millions of killings in the name of religion in 1947 partition. We must say that Gandhi was right in saying that 'true friendship is true assistance in diversity'

So many conferences are held every year and many days are celebrated. We have Environmental Day, Teachers Day and Days in the memory of important people; their importance is explored. Why don't we have a World Cooperation Day? This idea can be a utopia because the world and the people living in it are becoming extremely intolerant to face each other and listen to each other.

Very strong academic measures are to be taken to approve the dialogue among the religions of the World. One such effort took place in Japan in 2005

In March 2005, as reported elsewhere in this Bulletin, the XIX World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions was held in Tokyo. Taking advantage of what was to prove the largest gathering of scholars of religion from around the world in the history of Japan, the Nanzan Institute invited several participants to join for a day's workshop on "The Dialogue among Religions around the World". The Scholars were from the all around the world". The scholars from Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, Belgium, Cuba, Brazil, Philippines, Korea and Japan participated in the dialogue⁷.

Such conferences must be held again and again. The very nature of religion demands a dialogue between all the major world religions. This dialogue has particular urgency for the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. There are as many reasons for Muslims and Jews to engage in interfaith dialogue as there are for Jews and Christians to come closer together. Historically speaking, the Muslim world has a solid record of dealing with the Jewish people. Jews have always been welcomed in times of troubled water, e.g., when the Ottoman Empire embraced Jews after their expulsion from Andalusia.

6. Face to face interaction of the members of different faiths.

Face to face interaction among the members of different faiths will prove healthy for the dialogue and co-existence. Once we start doing things out of textual books which are virtually biased, the reality and the behavior of people would come through direct experience. Hanna Shefskey, a music teacher narrates a direct experience of two children from different faiths:

As I sat and talked with Ala Khatib, the co-principal of a Jerusalem elementary school, two young girls, one Jewish and one Arab, ran into his office. The Jewish girl, her bright red hair and freckles a great contrast to the olive coloring of her friend, went right up to Ala and began pleading with him to let his daughter sleepover at her house that night. When Ala finally said he would speak to his wife to see if it was possible, the girls exchanged a high-five, giddy with excitement, and ran off together down the hall. Although two girls begging their parents for a sleepover is not out of the ordinary, the friendship I witnessed between a young Jewish girl and a young Arab girl is

far from normal in Israeli society. In terms of typical, everyday encounters, Israeli Jews and Arabs are often very segregated....⁸

This is what the face to face interaction can do. But due to the lack of self-confidence, particularly in the last few centuries, Muslim have become almost anxious to demonstrate their 'separateness' from the rest of mankind. They progressively tend to emphasize their differences from them instead of trying to, what they so brilliantly did in their heyday, bring out the 'commonality' in human beings, their common ends, and to bridge the different paths by which they seek to reach them. This reversal of attitude seems to be contrary against the spirit of Islam, its traditions and above all glorious example set by the Prophet Muhammad⁹.

7. Youth must involve in promoting cultural peace and dialogue among civilisations.

The youth is the future and tomorrow's leaders are today's youth. It is very essential to promote a culture of peace among the youth through education and cultural programme. The participation of youth plays a key role in the future of the world. We know that majority of the population in the world are youth but their expression has very few channels.

In September 2006, a joint work was done by the students of a youth organization named as "Youth For Alliance Among Civilisations" in which they did a survey which addresses to the decision makers of the generation now in power; government and United Nations officials and diplomats, business leaders, donors, leaders of civil society organizations, teachers and university officials, community leaders, etc. In their survey the team contacted thousands of organizations and received feedback from 475 organizations in 125 countries. The report was submitted to the chair of 'Alliance Among Civilisations' and one of the paragraphs read:

Most youth suggest training and workshops to be conducted for youth on issues such as the culture of peace, conflict resolution and mediation, values and human rights. Vocational training and employment programmes are also seen as vital for youth in promoting a culture of peace.... Intercultural and international exchanges, where youth get to know others, are also popular proposals in building a culture of peace, and many youth have also mentioned the need to meet internationally, to promote networks and to publish and document their work, distributing the information widely, both online and on paper and by radio in local communities¹⁰.

8. We should learn to forgive others

The God forgives the one who asks! But human beings are locked in a 'tit for tat' situation. We must create an environment where people who commit mistakes are forgiven but at the same time taught with wisdom.

M Fethullah Gulen directs attention to the fact that if we do not forgive others, we in return have no right to expect forgiveness. All human beings are part of the same human family in the sense that we are fellow passengers on the ship called planet Earth. Gulen exhorts all of us to pull together to construct a better world built on tolerance. His optimistic and hopeful view of the future leads him to say that the twenty-first century will be called the age of tolerance. And he wants this tolerance to become permanent, that is, to last for all ages. His views about

the future stand diametrically opposed to those of Mr. Huntington¹¹.

III. CONCLUSION

In the end I would like to say that the decisions made by the powerful people may prove a gospel truth. They may mussel the ordinary people, intellectually by giving conflict prone theories and politically by exploiting your weakness. The people challenge the politics of the super power countries-at whatever stage and level of violence. There are ordinary people working to address it, to end violence, injustice, conflict or clash. The people around the world defend Human Rights, build understanding and exorcise the past: from Gujarat to Bradford, from Georgia to the Philippines, from Burma to Columbia and from Bosnia to Rawand. Civil Society is on the move. This movement needs a lot of impetus. The decision of peace making is not an easy task. It needs a lot of training from visionaries of peace-the prophets and strategists, philosophers and politicians, and act to transform relationships and build peace in our own communities¹².

We must encourage a new form of history, writing about the past and present from the point of view of those which have seemed to have no power, so that we recognize that we are all part of history and its making. We must create some unbiased theories which appeal to ever one relatively.

To create the sense of hope that there should be no clash or conflict can be a utopia because the terms and conditions to establish it are long and complex. This is also because human beings have accepted the conflict in their lives and to de-condition them from this needs intense psychological training. No one of us can work everything but every one of us can. We cannot end the clash neither I am here to end it because there needs a shift in political thinking from war to peace. I think due

the hard work of ordinary people at micro level this shift has begun to take place.

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