

The Dialogue with the Other in Islam

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In my treatment of this topic, I would like to deal with the terminology of Islam as a religion and civilization, then I deal analytically with dialogue. After that, I deal with issues from our time, dealing with "the other" from a comprehensive perspective and arrive at what the idea of "the dialogue with the other" means theoretical and practically in our times.

Concepts

1- Islam is the last of the divine messages that God has revealed to Prophet Muhammad, God's messenger, preacher, and warner. His message is the last chain in a series of divine messages that were delivered by God's prophets. The believers in this message are the Muslims who believe that the Qur'an is a divinely revealed book. It includes beliefs in God and His angels, books and messengers. Of these books are the Torah and the Bible that were delivered to Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them. The Muslims viewed Jews and Christians as the People of the Book, and therefore the Islamic caliphate respected their beliefs; for there is no compulsion in religion, and the contract with them gave them equal rights and duties.

Islam is a civilization, and it is the civilization that Muslims and non-Muslims from the peoples of the Islamic state belong to regardless of their confessions and races. They belonged to that civilization, which assimilated previous civilizations. Today it is in its fifteenth century of Islam and one of eight civilizations in our world.

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Islam's scope of civilization is regarded as the Islamic world, which includes all of the people that belong to the Islamic civilization, whether Muslims, Christians, or Jews or other religions. It extends over the old world of Asia, Africa and Europe. Other of its people migrated to the new world.

2-"Dialogue" is the process of dialoguing by speculation and analysis. Dialogue is commonly used in our days to cover all aspects. There is a talk about the dialogue of civilization, the dialogue of cultural trends, the North-South dialogue, the Arab-European dialogue, and the Muslim-Christian dialogue. Dialogue today is the spirit of day and one of its important manifestations. Our age is distinguished by a communication revolution that resulted from the scientific revolution. With the communication revolution along with its wire and wireless, radio and t.v., and land, sea and ariel means the instruments of communication among people have been strengthened. The scope of dialogue has expanded in an unprecedented way that is known to mankind. The great number of conferences and meetings and topics discussed testifies to this.

If we seek to find the usage of dialogue in the dictionary, we find that it means to return to the essence of a thing, and to dialogue to go back and forth or to respond. Thus, if they dialogue then they go back and forth in talks.

Dialogue then is a process between two or more parties, and it includes a statement and a response. The response brings about the need of each party to rethink its logic and statement. This rethinking could bring forth another statement followed by another response and review of positions. The Qur'an mentions three times the process of dialoguing in the chapters on the Cave and Polemics.

Sometimes dialogue has many parties, which increase the scope of argu-

ments and responses and rethinking and lead to new answers. This may lead to agreement or reinforces the different views of the dialoguing parties.

Maybe the most important connotation of dialogue is the ability to re-view one's view, which indicates the need to rethink during the process of re-view. For the view developed out of dialogue is neither constant nor un-changeable but is dynamic and subject to transformation.

The distinction between dialogue and polemic becomes important, for polemics is the negotiation with the aim of winning. Polemics means to tighten the argument, for the parties try to put the rope around the other. Other connotations of polemics include overcoming and overthrowing. The polemical position is categorical, aiming at changing the view of the other without any possibility of changing one's view. The Qur'an makes a clear distinction between dialogue and polemics.

What remains to be said is that dialogue implies talking that posits ideas. The process of dialogue includes positing of diverse ideas that constitutes the dialogue. Also, dialogue implies interaction between ideas, which starts in a difficult manner, then eases up as the interaction proceeds. Another issue that is involved in the process of dialogue, which results from interaction, leads every party to rethink its ideas and at the same time sharpens the different ideas.

Abu Hayan al-Tawhidi highlighted one characteristic of dialogue in his book on debates. A debate, as Dr. Ibrahim al-Kilani introduced the book, is that two or more people participate in a scholarly or philosophical dialogue, so that one takes from the other knowledge and science and provides him with his knowledge and science. In any dialogue there is always debating, which exchanges ideas and enlightens minds.

Therefore, we can see that the process of dialogue leads to great benefits that mankind needs.

3-. In our days, the issues of the age are determined by existing realities. We going through a difficult time that witnesses wars of a special kind that forewarns of a world dilemma whose repercussions are harsh. It seems that we need to posit dialogue instead of conflict so that we can know each other in a wise manner that leads to treating the problems that have arisen from realities. We need to establish peace that is based on justice.

This situation has been dealt with in many studies, articles and reports. Its main outline can be found in some of my books, especially *Urbanization, not Tyranny*, and *About the Future*. Here I summarize the main ideas.

There is a lot of talks about the problems that confront man, including protection of the environment and the judicious usage of raw material, especially what cannot be recycled, and the crisis of energy, labor, inflations, and fighting social ills that most people still suffer from, especially injustice and inequality that have spread among nations. There is need to defend human rights and struggle against the heritage of colonialism and protect peace and encourage demilitarization. All of this has been reported by the international committee for studying the problems of communication that the UNESCO published in 1981.

There is also a lot of discussion about the fact that a minority of people in our world possesses the great portion of wealth and income. There are hundreds of millions of hungry humans while there are others who are overtaken with wide-scale consumption. The countries that own a lot of raw materials participate marginally in industrial production. The dependence of the majority on the minority has become very solid, and the gap between countries that are mostly situated in the north and the others that are situated in the south is widening. The aspects of differentiations are increasing quantitatively and qualitatively. The first article of the UN Declaration con-

cerning the establishment of a new world order that was published in April-May 1974 states that the benefits of technical progress is not equally divided among the members of the international community. It is proven that it is impossible to achieve a just and balanced development of the international community under the current economic system. For there is a gap between the developing countries as independent countries since the current system perpetuates the inequalities. A few countries exploit world energy and raw materials in an extensive and exploitative manner. Therefore, they deprive other countries from enjoying their share from nature. This is taking place at all levels, including production and distribution of food, the spread of technology and industry, environment, systems and conditions of trade, the usage of raw materials, and work and laborers. What applies to the international economic system applies to the international political system, that is, the international systems with all its dimensions.

It is clear that the existing situation of our time is governed by an international system whose roots are derived from the European system. It is a system that started forming in Europe since the sixteenth century and became the governing system of relations between European nations first and extended later to other continents during the era of colonialism. Our world has known other systems, including the one in our Arab and Islamic civilization that governed relations with other peoples and countries. It is a system that is based on its own theory that is based on its own nature and sources, as was explained by Majid Khadduri in his introduction to al-Shibani's *Siyar*.

Futuristic studies that dealt with the existing international system speak of alternatives for international relations. Three systems are posited to determine the future of international relations. They are the system of cooperation and competition, the system of tension and deterrence, and the system of violence and war. The studies report that the system of armament is

superior to the system of disarmament and warn against the dominance of materialistic value in the West with both of its camps as well as local dislocations because the powers of production are not an organic part of the country, which enhances dependence. They also warn of the danger of spread of imbalanced dependence at the economic level, which will undermine the independent characters of countries, as described by 'Abd al-Mun'im Said in his book, *The Arabs and the Future of the International System*.

Looking into the reality of existing international system as well as its foundations and future visions leads us to suspect its ability to produce any positive international cooperation to deal with world problems. The problems of the system could be seen in colonialism, racial superiority, class exploitation, religious sectarianism, ideological conflicts, and official and unofficial terrorism. Behind these problems lies a crisis of values that affects the system; for the other is not recognized, and difference is not tolerated. It has a double standard and is dominated by the concept of sheer power and interest. The system is not informed by justice and right but by the idea of struggle, instead of recognition and cooperation. It considers nature to be concurred and is a natural enemy of man. The feeling of danger resulting from the crisis of values has become strong in our world because everyone feels threatened. This calls for the review of our world because of the repercussions of the international system. Our world is witnessing a revival of philosophical thought, which brought about again questions of the basic philosophy behind the system. It is also witnessing the phenomenon of a spiritual revival that interacted in its composition with different political, social, and cultural factors. Furthermore, it is witnessing a national consciousness and a tendency to unity that is based on diversity.

The result that we arrive at is that success in treating these issues re-

quires working for establishing a new international system that depends on high values and ethical doctrines. For human experience throughout history shows that any system loses its meaning at any level if it is not morally oriented. Peace is achieved when a moral value system is established. Harmony with nature requires that man realizes that he is part of the universal system and that a consciousness of all people and states of their belonging to their country, people, creed, civilization and recognizing cultural and national pluralism is realized. This leads to unity that is based on diversity through interaction between different civilizations.

This result shows the special importance of creed and national and cultural belonging in treating the problems of the age. It shows as well that there is a role that awaits the Arab and Islamic civilization so that it contributes in the making of the correct response to the challenges of the age and the response to the problem of the world.

It lastly shows that not responding to treating these problems and the continuation of the status quo will mean the domination of dependent relations when it comes to the economic system. This will lead to witness more interactions within the system of tension and deterrence, which will consequently lead to interactions within the system of violence and war. This situation will definitely not lead to the system of cooperation and competition.

There is no alternative before our nation and other nations that suffer from the current international system but to mobilize their capabilities to establish a new international system that is based on high values and moral principles with their interests along with bringing harmony to man with himself, society and environment.

4-"The other" is determined by whether we are speaking of one individual or all of the individuals. It revolves around the self. It has become a com-

mon term to signify the one who is different. Tahir Labib, the editor of the book, *The Image of the Other*, prefer the term, "otherness". He notices that the ignorance of the other and then his rejection is a phenomenon that is spread in all civilizations. However, knowing the other is enriching and the ignorance of the other is impoverishing. He warns that cultural isolation leads to racism and that the image about the other is not the other. I add that this image differs according to the level of knowledge and ignorance. In my book, *The Arab-European Dialogue*, I have explained that there are four images of the other and the self, and these are his image of myself, his image of himself, my image of the other, and my image of myself. All these are not corresponding images.

We should focus on cultural belonging. We find that "the other" from an Islamic perspective is the one who belongs to other civilizations in our world. I have explained in my book, *Arabs, Muslims, and Globalization*, after I have shown a number of views about these civilizations that the opinion that I feel comfortable with after deep thinking is that there are eight civilizational circles. Each has a comprehensive view, a dominant civilization with certain characteristics. There are the Western civilization, with its two branches, the European and North American, and the South American that has come about out of interaction of the colonizing settlers that came from the Iberian Peninsula with the aboriginals who were influenced by the African civilization that was effected by the Islamic civilization. I am of the view that makes a distinction between the two. There is also the Chinese Confucian civilization and the Japanese civilization in the Far East of Asia, and the Hindu civilization in India, and the Slavic Orthodox civilization in Russia and Southern East Europe. There is also the African civilization in the continent of Africa and the Islamic civilization with its branches in Asia and Africa.

If we focus on the belonging of the nation-state with its current borders, we find that "the other" is the one that is visiting the state or lives within its borders but has a different nationality.

From a religious perspective, the other is the one who has another religion. For the Muslims, he is a non-Muslim who has another religion. From a sectarian perspective, he is the one from another sect of the same religion.

I am mentioning such a multiple view of the other because of different belongings, which was posited by Yusuf al-Qaradawi in his book, *The Priority of the Islamic Movements*, which was published in 1990. He speaks of the Islamic movement and racial and religious minorities and the dialogue with the other, which he classified as secularists and the wise men as well as the dialogue with the religious dialogue (Islamic-Christian), and intellectual dialogue (with the orientalist) and the political dialogue with the West.

The Theoretical basis of the Dialogue with the Other in Islam

The Islamic creed provides generally a solid basis for dialogue with other religions and mankind on all subjects. Islam regards the principle of difference among people as a universal norm and divinely ordained. This is a result of the doctrine of the right to choose, for there is no compulsion in religion. Islam states that God created people of out females and males and made them peoples and tribes so people can recognize each other and cooperate in a pious and righteous manner. Prophet Muhammad bin 'Abdallah opted for dialoguing with the followers of both Judaism and Christianity. *Sahifat* (the Prophetic document) contained the basis of co-existence and cooperation and encouraged dialogue. Since then, dialogue has continued on and off among the followers of religions in the circle of the Arab and Islamic civilization.

The creedal basis is the best orientation for thinking about the topic of dialogue in its intellectual dimension, which human reason determines on the basis of revelation. Such is the basis of the dialogue among Muslims and Christians.

The idea of Muslim-Christian dialogue came to the fore in our contemporary world with the beginning of the modern time after the end of the Second World War. The revolution of technology interacted with the liberation movements at the political level. Soon a cold war started in the Western civilization between the Western states that adhere to liberalism and capitalism and the Eastern European states that adhere to Marxism, or what is commonly known as the conflict between East and West. Political thought in the capitalist West that is led by the United States put forward the idea of launching a Muslim-Christian dialogue in order to discuss international problems that face both Muslims and Christians as well as the state of the West and the Islamic world that gained independence so that the communist Marxist expansion could be curbed.

The Objective of the Dialogue with the Other from an Islamic Perspective

The general objectives of the dialogue with the other are to arrive at a common understanding against tyranny and at good deeds, for the Qur'an in the chapter on Al-'Imran call for the dialogue with the peoples of the book.

One of the objectives that has a priority is to recognize the other through knowing him and to correct the mental image about the other that is full of pre-judged views. We can realize this objective through meetings to discuss topics of interest between the parties or discuss the stereotypes.

Another topic is cooperation to realize piety and goodness through thinking about vital issues of interests to all parties of believers who may differ in their perspectives of the good, for the Qur'an in the chapter on the Cow calls

on Muslims to seek the good wherever it can be found.

We must remove dialogue, especially among religions, from discussing the essence of God. This does not mean that dialogue should not be concerned with the issues of difference and freedom, for the Qur'an acknowledges them and calls on the believers, the Magis, the Christians and others in the chapter on Pilgrimage to await the final decisions on the Day of Judgment.

The main objective of this dialogue is to declare the truth over the issues and matters that interest people and to remind people of the higher values and doctrines that must be adhered to from all, including the rulers. This requires that the parties to any dialogue seek the truth of religion as opposed to politics. Dialogue should call to the path of God, wisdom, and good preaching as well as calling on the rich people to help the others while enjoying their life, as the chapter in al-Qasas calls for. It also requires that people be reminded not to spread corruption or to tyrannize mankind.

The Topics of Dialogue

The topics of interest in the Muslim-Christian dialogue are numerous and could be classified in the following way. Some are related to basic creedal positions on specific topics, including primarily the issue of resisting racism and racial discrimination, the issue of social justice, and the issue of freedom and responsibility, and the issue of peace that is based on peace. Some are concerned with man and earth as well as our environment. Others are concerned with man and his society, the family, marriage, and chastity. It includes as well the position of women in the family and society and the integration between her and man on the ground of complete equality as well as social justice in all its forms and pluralism in society. Yet others are concerned with man and the ruler, shura and democracy, and political participa-

tion. They include as well work ethics, especially in the new domains that have been brought about by the revolution of technology. Lastly, the common reading of history in a positive way and developing future prospects should be of interest in the program on dialogue.

The formulas of Dialogue and those concerned with it

It is very necessary to draw the map of the parties concerned with dialogue, including sects, confessions, and institutions, as well as the formulas that have been used in the previous stage, which could facilitate new formulas and coordinate the success of Muslim-Christian dialogue. This dialogue should be supplemented by the dialogue among religions. Thereafter, it is easy to determine those people that are concerned with dialogue.

The exercise of dialogue has been repeated in the Arab and Islamic civilization during the last few decades and crystallized through the attempts to answer the question of how to arrive at an objective understanding between Muslims and others. An example of this is the conference on Islam and the West that was held in June 1996. Its working paper indicated the need to correct the errors in mutual understanding and adhere to tolerance, respect and recognizing the other. It also talked about the need to derive information from its original source in order to portray the true image of the other and to find the best ways that could be adopted by each party to appreciate the cultural contribution of each other in the construction of world civilization.

Ideas

The first idea is that the search for the topic does not start in vacuum. This paper is only one link in a chain of forums, meetings, and conferences that treated the topic. All of these activities fall into the phenomenon of di-

alogue, the dialogue among religions, ideologies, regions, states and groups. From among these dialogues is the Muslim-Christian dialogue that many Islamic, Arab, and Western institutes have contributed to, including the Al al-Bayt Royal Institute for Research on Islamic Civilization in Jordan. The Institute's director conducted a survey over the meeting on dialogue and had meetings with the Vatican and the Orthodox institute in Switzerland and the Dialogue of Religions in Britain. What is interesting is that the UNESCO paid attention to the dialogue among religions and called for a conference on religion for the culture of peace in Barcelona in 1994 and 1995 and issued a statement about that.

Also, the Arab-European dialogue between the European Union and the Arab League started officially in 1975. One of its committees specialized on Culture, Labor and Social Positions. The committee paid special attention to how to arrive at an objective understanding between the Arab and Islamic civilization and the Western civilization and the situation of the immigrant workers in Europe and acquainting the youth of the two regions with each other. Many specific results were arrived at that I explained in my book, *European and Arab Dialogue*.

The last and third example is the dialogue in a conference on Islam in Europe that dealt with precisely the relations between the Islamic and European civilizations and the Muslim's situations in Europe, which was held in Stockholm in July 1995. The brief report on the conference shows the richness of the issues discussed in the conference and was later issued in a book in 1995. The Institute of International Dialogue in the Hague held numerous dialogues that dealt with Muslim immigrants and women in both civilizations. It published books and pamphlets about these dialogues.

From exposing this issue I want to stress the necessity of benefiting from the results of these conferences and not to restrict them to a few. We should

think of the results and then apply them and find the mechanisms for implementation and study the possibility of coordination between diverse institutions and create a body for coordination.

The second idea is that the general environment surrounding this topic is unstable and is dominated by tension because of the information crisis that incites fear and feeds into discrimination and does not provide honest news. Also, the educational systems do the same because they have fallen to the burden of history and because of shortsighted politics regarding the issue of immigration and dealing with the immigrants, all of which lead to negative repercussions. Some specific events that have befallen the Islamic world lead to certain European positions that often contribute to incitement. The clear example is the events of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Dialogues that took place between the elites in the two regions have succeeded in reducing incitement and contributed to bettering the conditions among the elites. The news about this success was spread so that it may improve the conditions among the publics. They succeeded in acquainting active individuals in both regions with each other, which lead to an objective understanding and crystallized the idea that cooperation among civilizations, especially the Islamic and the Western, is the consequence of a long history and a necessity for the future.

What remains is that the elites succeed in making a vanguard for cooperation that aims at the realization of greater cooperation, mutual respect, and cooperation in formulating better policies. This requires the continuation of the efforts and consultation among individuals, then agreeing over the best methods and formulas to achieve that.

The third idea is that the success in fulfilling the objective of dialogue requires the realization the nature of the other party through understanding the true facts about the other and the self.

The fourth idea is that the success in achieving the objectives of dialogue requires paying attention to the social and economic situations and work seriously for resolving them.

After all, the contribution in the making of the correct response is an individual and collective responsibility of all members of civilization. They have to revive all circles of belongings in order to reinforce the national unity in the nation-state and cooperation in their civilization. All of this will lead to reinforce dialogue with other civilizations on the basis of a positive interaction that led to the creation of a correct international system and the realization of the peace that is based on justice.