

An Appraisal of Islamic View in Promoting Dialogue between Muslims and Non-Muslims

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Abstract

Islam being a universal religion from its inception provides and allows the concept of dialogue for the purpose of salvation and mutual understanding between Muslims and Non-Muslims like Jews, Christians and idol worshippers. Considering the misunderstanding of the concept of dialogue and its important the article is valuable particularly considering the nature of Nigeria and world at large. This article discusses the Islamic views in promoting dialogue based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Prophetic Sunnah. It identifies the Qur'anic injunction about the permissibility of engaging in dialogue and exemplary approaches of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in engaging non-Muslims in dialogue. It discusses the Qur'anic examples of dialogue as well as some etiquettes of engaging in these firms of discusses. The paper explores some of the basic mechanisms in engaging in dialogue in order to yield good example as well as the relevance of the teaching of Islam. The paper analyzes an Islamic understanding of human nature, considering the teaching of the Qur'an, Sunnah and some examples from the Islamic history. These sources require Muslim to engage in a positive and excellent manner with other fellow human beings of different faith so that understanding shall be established between them. The method applied is descriptive approach using library work.

Keywords: Qur'an, Sunnah, Dialogue, Muslim, Non-Muslims

Introduction

Islam being a universal and divine religion considers a dialogue as the best vehicle to achieve everlasting peace and harmony between Muslims and Non-Muslims. The Qur'an and Sunnah as the embodiment of all knowledge in Islam regulate the Muslim activities in both peace and war.

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It further teaches the Muslim *Ummah* on how engage in dialogue with other people. The article is served as guideline for Muslim on how to engage in dialogue, and for non-Muslims to clearly understand that there is no compulsion in Allah's religion. Islam comprises the comprehensive meaning of peace that includes the inner and spiritual peace and the outer social peace. Moreover, it includes the global vision of general universal peace for all humanity, since its basic principles include stability, mutual respect, and non-aggression to those who abide peacefully to just terms, particularly those who received the scriptures like the Jews and Christians.

The paper is divided into three; one will attempt to explain the Islamic concept of dialogue from linguistic meaning as well as technical meaning given by some scholars on the subject matter. Two, does Islam allow its followers to engage in dialogue with non-Muslims, if yes then what are the basic techniques that every Muslim required to know before he engages in any form of dialogue or discussion on any subject matter. Three, the paper explores Islamic perspective and view regarding dialogue, it will heavenly concentrates on the role of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* in promoting dialogue, this is another important part of the paper, it studies the Qur'anic verses together with their interpretation about dialogue between people of different faith. The prophetic *Sunnah*, and history have identified their approaches in engaging in dialogue with people in a most honorable way. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the Prophetic *Seerah* which shows Prophet Muhammad (SAW); interactions with non-Muslims, then finally conclusion and major findings.

The Concept of Dialogue in Islam

The root of the word *dialogue* is from the Greek word dialogus, from *dia*, across, and *legein*, to speak, it means is an effort to share meaning with someone. By intercultural or interfaith dialogue, it means a conversation between different individuals or groups whose purpose is simply honest engagement and increased mutual understanding. Various philosophers and social scientist have reflected on dialogue, and offered their own ideas and theories about it. Buber understands a dialogue as a kind of interaction that provides understanding through direct experience of the other. For Buber a dialogue is a deeply meaningful interpersonal experience which can change someone, as it can help see you from the perspective of the others (Kuracan and Erol, 16). Yankelovich, explores dialogue's potential to transform conflict into co-operation, describes dialogue as a conversation under three particular conditions:

- Equality (or at least suspension, as far as humanly possible, of inequality and coercive influences);
- Listening with empathy in order to understand, and
- Bringing assumptions out into the open (41).

According Kurucan and Erol dialogue can be defines as: “Meaningful interaction and exchange between people of different groups (social, cultural, political and religious) who come together through various kinds of conversation or activities with a view to increased understanding” (8). The purpose of dialogue is associated with some social goals, like improving good relations between different groups or help to resolve an existing conflict. And dialogue is one of the natural manifestations of human being. The Qur’an had clearly mentioned that. It explains that the fundamental oneness of all human beings and their ethnic and linguistic plurality together is to engage and understand one another. Moreover, from the beginning Allah does not create human being in different countries and ethnic forms to fight each other but to know and understand each other so that, they can live in harmony (Q.49: 13).

The dialogue was established by Islam in order to provide peaceful and good atmosphere of peace. The importance of dialogue can be understood from the early revelation of *Makkan* chapters, like in the chapter of an-*Nahl* verse 125. There is no doubt by opening this door it can serve as an opportunity to talk and listen to each other in a best approach. In this form of dialogue, the approach to others shall be in a form of tolerance, truthfulness, sincerity, respect and good will.

The Qur’an and Promotion of Dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims

The Qur’an is the book of Allah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) through Angel Jibril (AS). It is the supreme authority in Islam, and the primary source of law. Indeed, the Qur’an as an embodiment of all knowledge, it encompasses human needs and served as a guidance for the betterment of mankind. The Qur’an teaches mankind that Allah’s objective in creating human race in different communities was that they should relate to each other peacefully. Dialogue is a natural manifestation of our humanness as both *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* make it clear. Allah says:

O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of

you with Allah is that who has *At-Taqwa* (pious). Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, Well-Acquainted (with all things) (Q.49:13).

Allah says in this verse, explaining to the mankind that they were created from one soul, and He created his partner from it, they are *Adam* and *Hauwa*. From them nations developed. Allah made this general call to the whole of mankind that they are from the same origin. And this creation was not coincidence, but rather was systematically designed by Him, so that people may know each other. Humans are created to know each other not to fight each other. In an authentic *Hadith* narrated by *Bazzar* in his *Musnad*, the Prophet says: “All of you are the children of Adam, and Adam was created from clay” (Ibn Kathir, Vol. IV: 136). This point is mentioned in several verses teaching diversity in ethnicity, color, faith and culture were intended by the Creator: Allah says: “...If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you.” (Q. 5:48). Furthermore, Allah says:

And if your Lord had pleased, He would have made all people a single community (nation following one religion), but they continue to have their differences. * Except him on whom your Lord has bestowed His Mercy, and for that, did He create them and the words of your Lord has been fulfilled “Surely, I shall fill Hell with *jinn* and men altogether (Q. 11:118-119).

The concept of dialogue with the people of the book is one of the most important concepts in Islam, the Qur’an discussed it extensively. This is because, they were the possessors of divine knowledge, and in most cases the polytheist of *Quraysh* relied heavenly on them seeking their help on how to defeat Prophet in argument. Some of the few examples include their enquiry about *Dhur-Qarnayn* and *Ruh*. (Ibn Kathir, 137). There is no doubt, convincing *Ahl Kitab* through dialogue is tantamount to convincing the Arabs polytheist. For this, Qur’an gave more emphasis on dialogue with *Ahl Kitab*. Allah has commanded Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to invite and call mankind to the way of Allah with absolute wisdom. Allah says:

Invite (mankind, O Muhammad (SAW) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching and argue with them in a best way. Truly, your Lord knows best who has gone astray from His path, and He is the Best Knower of those who are guided (Q. 14:125).

Imam ibn Jarir at-Tabariy as quoted by Imam ibn Kathir says: “what was revealed to him from the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah*” and argue with them in a best manner it means whoever demands a dialogue from them, respond to him in a best manner, with absolute lenient, mercy and best approach. (Ibn Kathir, Vol. III: 50). There is a wonderful issue concerning the revelation of *Suratul Nahl*, it was unanimously agreed by the scholars, it was revealed at the later time of Makkan period. The Prophet (SAW) introduced Islam outside vicinity of Makkah. He concentrated meeting the Arabs delegation during the time of Hajj (Pilgrimage). The chapter was revealed to equip him with proof on how to engage in dialogue. On the other hand, the polytheist of *quraysh* consulted and sought aid from the *Ahl-al-Kitab* (Jews and Christians) on how to respond to the Prophet. On this scenario some portion of *Suratul Maryam*, *Kahf*, *D.H* were revealed (Suyudi, Vol.I:21-22).

Moreover, since the chapter was revealed at Makkah, this indicated right from the beginning, Islam was built upon peaceful dialogue between the Muslims and the non-Muslims. Prophet (SAW) continued on this pattern in his invitation in both Makkah and Madinah time. Some may argue that, the dialogue might have been utilized in Makkah due to the weakness of the Muslim *ummah* at that time. Nevertheless, the approach has been repeated in a much more advance and systematic way in Madinah. In Makkan chapters the Qur’an narrates some forms of dialogue between Prophets and their communities. One of the best examples of these is the chapter of *Hud*. In this chapter, Allah (SWT) mentions in detail the approach adopted by some Prophets like Nuh, Hud, Salih and Shu’aib (AS). Moreover, Allah explained in some chapters, the approaches adopted by Prophet Ibrahim (AS) in dealing with his people. In chapter of *Maryam*, Allah shows how Prophet Ibrahim uses some marvelous words in trying to convince his dear father to the path of Allah. The scholars of *Uloom al-Qur’an* and *Usul al-Tafsir* had the view that about eighty verses of the chapter of *Al-Imran* were revealed to the Prophet (SAW) in his dialogue with Christians of *Najran*. Indeed, this indicates how Qur’an gives the concept of dialogue importance and Allah uses soft words in calling them. Allah says:

Say, O people of the Book, (Jews and Christians) let us arrive to a statement that is just to us all: that we worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partner with Him, and none of us takes others as beside Allah as lords. Then if they turn away, say: “bear witness that we are Muslims” (Q.3:64).

This verse commands the Prophet (SAW) and his *ummah* to establish good relations with people of the Book and to unite around common issues. In a way, it draws a framework for dialogue. Another verse mentions common points of faith and urges the avoidance of being disputatious and the building of a positive relationship. Allah says:

And argue not with the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), unless it be in (a way) that is best (with good words and in a good manner), except with such of them who do wrong; and say (to them): “We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you; our God and your God is one, and to Him we have submitted (Q. 29:46).

The Sunnah and Promotion of Dialogue Between Muslims and non-Muslims

Sunnah is the second source of Islamic law; it is the saying, action or tacit approval of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The Qur’an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad, his primary assignment is to explain the Qur’an to his *ummah*. Several verses in the Glorious Qur’an explain that, some includes the followings: Allah says:

And We sent not a Messenger except with the language of his people, in order that he might make (the Message) clear for them. Then Allah misleads whom He wills and guides whom He wills. And He is the All-Mighty, the All-Wise. (Q.14:4).

In Suratul *Nahl*, Allah reaffirm this role: Allah says: “With clear signs and Books, and We have also sent down to you the Reminder that you may explain clearly to men what is sent down to them, and that they may reflect.” (Q: 16:44). In another place, He says: “And We have not sent down the Book (the Qur’an) to you (O Muhammad SAW) except that you may explain clearly to them those things in which they differ, and a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe” (Q: 16:64). This is Allah’s tradition in sending His Messengers, they were sent with the language of their people. Allah charged them with the responsibility of explaining the Book to their *ummah*. (Az-Zahabiy, Vol. I 33). In this connection, there is an authentic *hadith* narrated by Al-Miqdam ibn Ma’adi that the Prophet (SAW) says:

Verily, I have been given the Book and something like it with it, but soon a satiated man will be on his couch, and he will say: ‘You should adhere to this Qur’an. Whatever you find permitted in it, take it as permissible, and whatever you find forbidden in it, take it as forbidden (Sunan, Abi Dawud 33).

Considering the role of *Sunnah* in the interpretation of the Glorious Qur’an, example will be highlighted to see how the Prophet (SAW) applied this injunction of dialogue. Some include the followings:

Dialogue of Prophet and Delegation of Quraysh

After instruction to spread the message of Islam to his near communities, the Prophet and those who accepted his mission faced certain hurdles. The *Quraysh* applied some measures in condemning the spread of the message. They portrayed the Prophet as soothsayer, poet and insane in order to deform the Message and the Messenger. They persecuted his followers and, in some occasions, resorted to dialogue. Allah says: And those who disbelieve say: “Listen not to this Qur’an, and make noise in the midst of its (recitation), that you may success (Q: 41:26).

Ibn Ishaq reported that ‘Utbah ibn Rabi’ah, one of the wise men and leaders of *Quraysh*, says in their meeting place, while Prophet (SAW), and was sat alone at the Ka’abah. “O community of Quraysh! May I go to Muhammad to talk to him, and offered some proposals, may be he might accept some, they say: “Of course, O the father of al-Walid! Discuss with him. Then Utbah went, and sat beside the Prophet (SAW). He says: “O my nephew! Indeed, you know your high position among us, and your excellent qualities as well as your pure lineage. Certainly, you brought a serious issue to your community that you divided them, criticize their line of thinking, you abused their idols and religion. You ascribed their forefathers as disbelievers. Please listen to me carefully, for I will make certain offers for you to consider which of them you will accept (Ibn Hisham, Vol.I:293-294).

The Prophet (SAW) says “speak O the father of al-Walid, I do hear you.” He says; “O my nephew! If money is what made you to proclaim this mission, we will gather money from our properties until you become the richest among us. If leadership you like, we will install you as our leader, we will not make any decision without consulting you. If power you wish, we will make you a king among us. And if what is coming to you cannot resist against him, we will call a

physician and spend as much money as we can to cure you. Prophet (SAW) says, have you finished O the father of al-Walid, he answered: “Yes” Prophet says: “then listen to me,” (Ibn Hisham, Vol.I:294-295). The Prophet recited to him the first verses of chapter of *Fussilat*. Allah says:

Ha-Mim, a revelation from, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. A book whereof the verses are explained in Detailed-Qur’an in Arabic for a people who know. It gives glad tiding and warning, but most of them turn away (Q.41:1-3).

The Prophet went on reciting the chapter and ‘Utbah was listening to him. He puts his hand behind his back and leaned on them. When the Prophet (SAW) reached the verse of prostration, he prostrated himself and says: “You have heard what I recited to you O father of al-Walid. So do whatever you like” (Ibn Hisham, Vol.I:295). In another narration, “‘Utbah listened to the Prophet till he reached verse of thirteen which threatened those who turn away a severe punishment like the punishment of ‘*Aad* and *Thamud*. So, he put his hand on the Prophets mouth requesting him to stop saying: that’s enough, that’s enough. After that ‘*Utbah* returned to his friends, when they saw him coming towards them, they said: “We swear that the father of al-Walid came back with another stand.” When he sat, they asked him, what is the outcome O father of al-Walid? He says:

Indeed, I heard a speech, which I never heard before, by Allah it has nothing to do with poetry, sorcery or magic, it is superior to any other forms. O people Quraysh obey me, and gather your affairs to me. Leave that man alone and give way to his vocation. I swear there is great affair about his mission. If Arabs succeeded against him, you are relieved from him. If he surpasses them in power, his kingdom and might will be yours, you are closer to him.” They said: indeed, he confused you O Abul Walid with his tongue. He replied “this is my opinion regarding him, so do whatever you like” (Ibn Kathir, Vol.IV:132-133).

Indeed, this is one of the best examples of the Prophet’s dialogue with the polytheist of Makkah. And there is a great lesson that could be derived from it. First, Islam allows the concept of dialogue from its beginning of the mission, this dialogue between the and one of the leaders of Makkah, ‘Utbah ibn Rabi’ah happened in the early days of Islam about a 5th year after Prophet

proclaimed his mission and it continues as we will see in Madinah. Second, both the speakers listen attentively to each other and used soft words in convincing one another, ‘Utbah says O my nephew, while Prophet says O Abul-Walid. Third, both of them enter the dialogue with clean hearts and ready to accept the truth. At the end ‘Utbah was convinced that Qur’an is not a magic, sorcery or poetry, he tried to show the Quraysh a right way in dealing with the Prophet and his mission but they rejected his opinion.

Delegation of Najran

The *Sunnah* demonstrates to the Muslims community how to engage in a dialogue with the people of the book. *Imam* ibn Kathir in his *Tafsir* mentions that, the causes of revelation of early part of *Suratu al-Imran* is when a delegation of Christians of *Najran* came to negotiate a pact with the Prophet (SAW). The Prophet allowed them to pray and settle in his mosque which lasted for some days. In some narrations they are about sixty men fourteen were nobles and monks. The topic is on the Prophet hood and Lordship of Prophet Isah (AS), they want to prove to the Prophet (SAW) that Jesus is god or is the son of God. Allah is the third of three (trinity), they choose two people to represent them in the dialogue; they are Abu Haritha bn ‘Alqama, and ‘Aqib ibn Abdul-Masih (Ibn Kathir, Vol.I:551).

Qur’an revealed clarifying the position of Jesus; the Prophet asked them to accept Islam since they were defeated in the argument. They say: “We are unready Muslims” Prophet says: “Indeed you did not submit” they say: We are Muslims before you,” Prophet says: What prevented you from becoming Muslims you are ascribing partners to Allah and eating pork.” They said okay, tell us the father of Jesus O Muhammad? The Prophet remain quiet, then Allah revealed some portion of *Suratu Al-Imran* from beginning to about eighty verses responding to the enquiry of the delegation of Najran. (Ibn Kathir, 551-553). In respond to that particular question, Allah says: “Verily, the likeness of Isah (Jesus), before Allah is the likeness of Adam. He created him from the dust, then (He) said to him: “Be! -and he was” (Q. 3:59).

They requested the Prophet to give them chance to discuss the matter with their brothers. When they returned, they said: “O Abul-Qasim, we will remain in our religion and you too remain in your religion. Please send a man among your companions that you pleased with him, who can rule over us in matters that we disagree in our property.” Prophet says: “Indeed, I will

send to you the most trust in my community”. He says: Raised O Aba Ubaidata ibn Jarrah, when he rose, the Prophet says: “this is the most trustworthy of this community.” (Sahih, Al-Bukhari: 762). The dialogue with the delegation of *Najran* has really showed how the Prophet (SAW) practically indicated compassion and builds a good relation with them. They completely agreed that he is a Messenger of Allah, rather requested him to allow them to remain in their religion and he agreed. They also agreed to live under his leadership by asking him to send one of his companions to be a judge for them.

Some major Lessons Derived from the Dialogue

Hikmah: the term *al-hikmah* is general terms which can be applied to any form of wisdom. *hikmah* has been mentioned in some places in the Glorious Qur’an, sometimes it is paired with the word *al-Kitab* (Qur’an) in more than ten times, it implies the *Sunnah* of the Messenger of Allah according to the view of some scholars like Imam Shafi’i (Ibn Kathir: Tafsir 189) indeed, wisdom is one of the key components in conveying Allah’s message to humanity. *Hikmah* is given by Allah out of His bounties, and can be granted to whom He wishes. Allah says: “He grants *hikmah* to whom He pleases, and he, to whom *Hikmah* is granted, is indeed granted abundant good. But none remember except men of understand” (Q.2:269).

Wisdom implies that one shall use discretion in the work of propagation; it also implies that a person shall apply his intelligence, capacity and reading the current situation. Mu’awiyah (RA) says: “I apply not my sword, where my lash suffices, nor my lash where tongue is enough. And even if there be one hair binding me to my fellowmen, I do not let it break: when they pull, I loosen, and if they loosen, I pull” (Hitti 197).

Good Admonishing: after *hikmah* good admonishing is another excellent form that Muslim supposed to apply in dialogue. One should not content with convincing the addressee with argument alone but should also appeal to his feelings. Admonition should be administered in such a manner as to show sincere concern for and the welfare of the addressee, like in the visitation of Christians of *Najran*. It also implies use of sweet tongue, show noble character and gives reasonable and appealing arguments, and avoids from indulging in polemics and controversies.

Patience: Another good quality to be learned is the application of patient in conducting a dialogue. The other speaker might use some words which can hurt his colleague. In his dialogue with Utbah ibn Rabi'ah, indirectly he ascribed madness to the Prophet (SAW). But he never responds to that in compliance with Allah's command: "Show forgiveness, enjoy what is good, and turn away from the foolish." (Q. 7:199). In dialogue the aim was not to win as clearly seen in the Prophet dialogue with Utbah and Christian of *Najran*. They fully convinced with the proofs presented by the Messenger of Allah, but they decided to remain in their religion and Prophet approved their request by sending Abu Ubaidah to them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the article defined the concept of dialogue from linguistic and technical perspectives, the genesis of dialogue has been analyzed from the Qur'anic perspective, some of the verses in this connection were highlighted to show there important. Furthermore, some examples were given in the paper that indicated how the Prophet (SAW) conducted dialogue with non-Muslims in Makkah and Madinah. The Qur'an and Sunnah established the concept of dialogue in order to ensure harmony and happiness in this life. Also, it is very pertinent to understand that dialogue has been established in the Islamic law to serve as an instrument of enlightening the followers about the objectives and purpose of the revealed religion, considering the fact that the source of the revealed religion is one. Some important tips have been mentioned which can help someone who engage in dialogue to consider, like patience, wisdom and good admonishing.

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