

Etiquettes and Principles of Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

It is not encrypted from any one that the significance of interfaith dialogue is of pivotal significance in today's developed and scientific age. Dialogue and discussion is the only tool used by the preacher of any religion to draw the attention of the addressed towards his invitation. Bilateral dialogue is such a device for preaching through which the audience can be compelled to think seriously and deeply. This style of interaction between the speaker and the listener consequently results in paving the way for emerging the facts. After the dialogue, the opponent either accepts a preacher's stance or rejects it using his intellect and logic. This dialogue and debate can happen between individuals, civilizations and different religions.

Interfaith dialogue in the light of the Holy Quran

Muhammad ﷺ was the last prophet of Allah and his *Ummah* (Followers) is the last *Ummah*. So to convey the divine message to all the people is our fundamental, moral and religious responsibility and the same responsibility is due on all Muslim *Ummah* (Followers) either individually or collectively. Islam is the only religion in the world which not only directs for the propagation of Islam but also does have certain etiquettes for dialogue and discussion with different civilizations, nations or individuals. The Holy Quran commands Islamic preacher to invite people to Islam with gentleness and wisdom and to be soft and tender during discussion with them¹. This is the unique attribute which distinguishes it from other divine and non divine religions. The point how people should be invited to truth

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was first used by Muhammad ﷺ. Other religions which claimed to be missionary religions can't say that their Holy Scriptures and books have an in-depth clarification regarding rules and principles for preaching. But the Book of Muhammad ﷺ tells its followers quite comprehensively and briefly how to convey the message of Allah to mankind and how to invite them to the truth.

Fundamentale tiquettes and principles of interfaith dialogue

Significance of interfaith dialogue is crystal clear from the *Seerah*(Footsteps of the prophet ﷺ).He ﷺ directed his companions (May Allah be please with them)on different occasions to learn different languages because bilateral debates and discussions can only be noteworthy and impressive if the language is soft, simple and comprehensible. Using uniform language results in mutual attachment and shunningestrangement; and the objective of the discussion can easily be comprehended.

Keeping the urgency of the said objective in view,Hazrat Zaid Bin Thabit(May Allah be Pleased with him) was directed to learn Syrian language to be able to have discussions with Jews in their language and to have negotiations on their point of views, doubts and ideas².

Similarly dialogue of Hazrat Abu Khuraira (May Allah be Pleased with him) in Persian language is another such proof.³ Such type of theories obviously show that companions (May Allah be pleased with them) of the prophet ﷺ learnt different languages to achieve their targeted objectives and to have discussions with Non-Muslims to resolve their concerns.

Ambassadors sent to different kings by the Prophet ﷺ miraculously seem to speak the language of the people they were sent to and this clearly shows the importance of uniformity in language for dialogue and debates.

In addition, it was the integral part of the strategy of the Holy Prophet ﷺ to send those persons as preachers to different nations who were from those very nations having enough know-how about their culture, customs and languages. The strategy of

the Holy Prophet ﷺ evidently shows that interfaith dialogue was given prime importance and that was the reason that He ﷺ equipped his companions with this weapon to achieve his ﷺ objectives.

Principles of interfaith dialogue

The opportunity to work on interfaith dialogue is a real blessing. It was performed by all the prophets and we received it through them. It is a duty of enormous worth. A work is done with appropriate etiquettes according to the worth of the work. The significant the work, the significant will be its etiquettes. Enough importance should be given to etiquettes to achieve the targeted objectives. Its usefulness is undoubtedly instant and robust if done with etiquettes. Otherwise, Sin must not waste good, is the right example in its explanation. Since this is the work of the prophets so their adopted etiquettes should be taken into account.

There are not rigid and fixed rules in the Holy Quran for the methodology of dialogue, rather it is done with insight and wisdom. The style of dialogue is set according to the environment, individuals' nature and his knowledge about the religion. Since a preacher is the slave of the environment he is living in and the said environment is always variable. So the preacher should have both theological and mental presence of mind together with strong communication skills. In addition, a preacher should have enough understanding about the psychology of humans and he should make them understand his point of view by narrating their limitations first. So it will not be good to say that a preacher should tell this and refrain from that⁴.

This is the reason that the Holy Quran doesn't have any fixed boundaries or rigid regulations about dialogue and it has been mainly left on the intellect of the preacher. How and what strategy should be applied during dialogue is a question that can be responded better by the preacher himself keeping before him his nervousness, spiritual understanding and religious proficiency. He can opt better for the superlative and exact strategy.

The Holy Quran narrates it very briefly in a grand style and in it lies the spirit of the preaching. The said verse is:

ادع الى سبيل ربك بالحكمة

Now it is clear that the Holy Quran doesn't fix a proper methodology for dialogue as the phases of variation are apparent with human intellectual advancement⁵.

A close look at the methodologies adopted by the prophets during dialogue clearly indicates that they adopted highly developed and praiseworthy methodologies but with enough variations and modifications per conditions and human advancement. One particular methodology shouldn't be insisted on while preaching. Rather they should use those sophisticated methods which are present in the age they are living in and which can best suit their required objectives and the said should be changed per needs⁶.

It is certainly clear that the best ways, which are easily understandable and lucid and which can best achieve the required objectives, should be adopted. Especially in today's age of communicational advancement and resources, a preacher can employ such tools for religious purposes and can achieve the required ends easily.

Still after in-depth thoughts and comprehensive study of *Sharia* (Islamic code of life), the following principles and etiquettes can be formulated.

(1) **Selflessness**: It was the basic principle of prophets' dialogues that it was without any worldly gains or incentives⁷. Selflessness in dialogue and expectations of no incentives or gains has been common in all the lives of the prophets and the said quality is instrumental in making their dialogue and preaching inspiring⁸. It is a proved reality that there isn't any positive impression on the audience when a preacher performs it for any worldly gains or incentives⁹. Surely, a preacher doesn't do it for any worldly praise or admiration. His invitation towards Allah primly comprises of two things; firstly, he doesn't do it for any worldly gains or incentives and secondly, his own life is stainless.¹⁰ So piousness, no human expectations and sincerity are the

prime qualities of a preacher¹¹. The prime objective of preaching is to pursue the footsteps of the prophets who, according to the Holy Quran, told their respective nations that they are preachers, rather than businessman. In other words all of them told them that they were in no way in need of any worldly gains or incentives from them. Rather, they see Allah for His countless returns in the afterlife.¹²For an inspirational preaching, it is obligatory that it should be free from worldly gains or incentives.

- (2) **Good Will:** Second essential of preaching and dialogue is the feeling of affection and good will for the mortal beings of Allah. Whenever one notices a person off-track from Allah, he suffers from immeasurable grief and he struggles hard to make reconciliation between the Creator and the created. The dialogue done with the same spirit is impressive and inspiring.¹³It is obvious from the lives of the entire prophets that they used to be very distressed whenever they noticed any person off-track or deprived from the blessings of Allah. They used to invite people towards Allah with the tool of affection and love. The principles of preaching adopted by the Holy Prophet ﷺ are frequently described in the Holy Book which shows his high level of restlessness for his *Ummah* (Followers) resulting in his poor health and back aches¹⁴. He led a dejected life due to extra care of his *Ummah* (Followers)¹⁵. The Holy Prophet ﷺ used to get worried whenever his *Ummati* (Follower of his religion) was in trouble and he strived hard to be instrumental in opening all the doors of blessings for him¹⁶. It is clear from *Sharia's* (Islamic code of life) that good will should dominate other things and only then it would be noteworthy¹⁷. And that is the prime reason of using Quranic word *Nasih* (Reformer) for the preacher. A preacher is amid two types of worries. Firstly, he considers himself

atrustworthy of Allah' Din and strives hard to avoid any disloyalty with Allah. He tries to keep away fromHis wrath during his duties. Secondly, he performs his job with immense good will trying to bring human beings under Allah's umbrella of blessings¹⁸.

- (3) **Tenderness:** The third principle of dialogue is using the weapon of tenderness and compassion in its performance. It is the essence of a preacher to adopt a tender approach while preaching to avoid arising of hatred and wrath of the addressees. In the absence of tender approach, a preacher will get cold or even negative response no matter how best the subject of the dialogue is. It will make the respondent obstinate and inflexible and resultantly will have negative implications for preaching. So it has been repeatedly directed in the Holy Quran that a tender and soft approach should be adopted while preaching which will undoubtedly affect the hearts of the receivers¹⁹. Tenderness in language is the tool of a preacher making his dialogue attractive and heart touching. While the reverse approach can adversely affect the work of a preacher distorting everything. So it was especially commanded to the Holy Prophet ﷺ to be tenderhearted and soft towards his *Ummah* (Followers).

Otherwise his ﷺ *Ummah* (Followers) would have left him alone instead of accepting his ﷺ message.²⁰ You forgive them and repent Allah on their behalf.²¹ He ﷺ used to instruct his companions (May Allah be pleased with them) to be soft and tenderhearted, rather than rigid and inflexible and due to such enlightened principles, Islam spread in the length and breadth of the human planet. Resultantly it gave new life to the dry and lifeless leaves of humanity refreshing their discolored flowers and Oneness of Allah was spread. The sophisticated and subtle breeze of winds of the special words *قال الله وقال الرسول* meaning Allah says and Muhammad ﷺ says) was instrumental in the development of pious deeds and Islamic nourishment. The dry streams of wavering morality touched the heights of model morality; the falling democracy and sociology started it upward

motion towards purity and refinement; and the withered flowers of civilization saw the charming spring season amid the season of autumn and this is the quality of Islam.²² For instance, Allah sent Hazrat Moses (Peace and blessings be upon him) who was Allah's loving prophet but here the point to be pondered is *where and whom he is being sent to?* Surely, to a rival who is Allah's confirmed enemy. One of the most beloved persons is being sent to a despicable creature. Both are standing opposite to one another in every respect and are in full contrast to one another. There is no disparity between the two common persons. This disparity is found between the two persons totally in contrast to one another. One of the greatest prophets of his age is being sent to a person who challenges Allah's highness and prestige. But still Hazrat Moses (Peace and blessings be upon him) is instructed:

فَقُولَا لَهُ قَوْلًا لَّيْنًا لَعَلَّهُ يَتَذَكَّرُ وَيُخْشَى

"To be soft and tender while giving him Islamic invitation with the hope that he might listen to him and become among the fearful."

Looking at such divine guidance, there remains no room for a preacher to be harsh or inflexible in his dialogue. Undoubtedly no one can take the lead from Pharaoh in terms of denial, arrogance and disobedience and who committed even the great sin of saying:

أَنَا رَبُّكُمْ الْأَعْلَى

"I am the greatest Lord."

But still the prophet of that time is directed to be soft and tender²³. It is one of the important principles of a dialogue that the preacher should adopt a sympathetic and compassionate attitude while preaching devoid of how much defiant and propagator of false beliefs the person to be preached is. It is more likely that the addressee might feel fear of Allah in his heart after in-depth thinking developed due to soft and tender words²⁴.

(4) **Decrement**: One of the principles of dialogue taught by Muhammad ﷺ is that the entire burden of Sharia shouldn't be loaded on the addressee's shoulders at once. Rather it should be done categorically enabling him to be at ease in understanding and acting on it.