

The Necessity of Inter-Religious Dialogue and Its Philosophical and Dogmatic Obstacles

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In this paper, the need for interfaith dialogue in the contemporary world has been emphasized in the light of the rise of ISIS and other *takfiri* movements. This necessity has been understood both by political and religious authorities in the Shiite world and by Christian religious authorities. It will be shown that the central message of all Abrahamic religions is theism; that is, the worship of God and justice as opposed to egotism or self-worship. Then, it will be explained how, in the context of interreligious dialogue, relativism as opposed to realism is a main philosophical barrier, and exclusivism as opposed to inclusivism tends to be a major dogmatic barrier.

Keywords: interfaith dialogue, theism, relativism, exclusivism.

The Chaotic Situation of Abrahamic Religions Today

The contemporary historical situation requires Abrahamic Religions to reinterpret religious identity and religiosity. The extremist *takfiri*

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movements and ISIS, simultaneously, threaten humanity, spirituality, and religiosity in the contemporary world. The experience of *takfiri* movements has proved that in the pluralistic and inter-connected modern world, it is impossible to live a religious life unless various religious movements support one another. An ethical and religious life is possible only within the framework of an organized and secure society, which has been the target of Takfiri movements.

The dangerous situation today demands that religious people practically attempt to cooperate with one another. At the same time, they must try to redefine their theological and philosophical notions.

There are two examples of this way of thinking in the Islamic world amongst the Shia of the Middle East. The first is the view of Ayatollah Sistani, a religious authority for the Shia world and the main political-spiritual leader of the Shias of Iraq. The other is the view of Ayatollah Khamenei, another religious authority and the major political-spiritual leader of the Iranian Shias. The latter is manifested in Ayatollah Khamenei's letter to the youth in western countries.

Ayatollah Sistani not only considers Sunnis as the brothers of the Shias but their "selves" (Sistani n.d.). Apart from that, he also believes that Izadis are a God-seeking minority, whose fundamental rights need to be supported by Shias.

Ayatollah Khamenei started a dialogue with the youth in western countries and invited them to learn about Islam from its primary and authentic sources:

My second request is that in response to the wave of pre-assumptions and negative propaganda [against Islam], try to acquire a direct and first-hand knowledge of Islam ... I do not urge you to accept my understanding or any other understanding of Islam. I only

want you not to allow others to inform you of this dynamic and influential reality [Islam] through their dirty agendas and goals. Learn about Islam through the primary and authentic sources. Get acquainted with Islam through the Qur'an and the life of the Great Prophet (of Islam). (Khamenei 1394 Sh)

It is clear that the idea here is to introduce oneself to others not to prove the correctness of one's ideas or the incorrectness of others' views. This can lead to the coexistence of religions, which one might claim is essential today if we want to last until the end of time. As Allamah Jawadi Amuli puts it:

In my opinion, until this world is as it is, there will never be only one particular religion. It is in the Hereafter that people will know the truth, and they will be directed towards it. Thus, in this world, while things are as they are, we would always see a multiplicity of religions. (Javadi Amoli 1393 Sh)

One can take these views as contemporary examples of religious dialogue in Iran—something that has surfaced in the aftermath of the current hostile environment. One such example is a dialogue between Islam and Christianity and the forming of a society called Safa Khanah (literally, “the House of Happiness”) in the multicultural and multi-religious city of Isfahan during the first decade of the twentieth century (Hasani 2014).

Around 1320/1920 (Shabani 2007), Rukn al-Mulk, the governor of Isfahan, with the support of the political jurist of the time, Hajj Agha Nurullah Isfahani (Qasemi 1996), decided to establish Safakhaneh in Isfahan (Najafi 2011, 88-90). After this resolution, the famous theologian of the time, Agha Muhammad Ali Hasani, known as Da'i al-Islam, was chosen to carry out this task. This person was a graduate of jurisprudential school of the well-known jurist, Aqa Muhammad Taqi Najafi, and the philosophical school of Akhund Kashi and Jahangir

Khan Qashqa'i in Isfahan. Besides having complete proficiency in English, Arabic, Hebrew, and Urdu, he had a thorough knowledge of Persian literature.

Upon the establishment of Safakhaneh in Isfahan, there were detailed dialogues between the Muslims and Christians of the time (Najafi 2004, 36-35). These dialogues were published lithographically in *al-Islam* monthly—the first religious publication in the early years of the twentieth century (Najafi 2004, 117).

On the other hand, and in the Christian World, a recent statement *Who Do We Say That We Are: Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious World* (World Council of Churches 2014) has paved the way for the further redefinition of the boundaries between various religions:

1. Human beings live in a world of many different faiths, different religions. In truth this has always been so, but developments throughout the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first, facilitating speed of communication and travel, together with changes in the political order and large scale migration have brought home to many this reality in a way that they would not have previously imagined, or perhaps even desired. Such realisation of the religious plurality of our world can provoke a variety of reactions among Christians. These can include wonder, challenge, hostility, embarrassment, puzzlement, self-questioning and fear. (World Council of Churches 2014, 1)

2. Jesus once asked his disciples the question: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8.29 and parallels). Today, mindful of the religiously plural contexts in which Christian life and witness is set within our world, we ask of ourselves: “Who do we say that we are?” Christians in every age have implicitly asked this question, for it is the point of deep self-reflection where, taking seriously the contemporary needs of witness and mission, we discover whose we are and whom we serve. Our answer to this question both reflects and guides the way

we live out our unique religious identity and calling. (World Council of Churches 2014, 1)

10. So in responding to the challenges offered to us by other faiths and their peoples, ..., we are also rethinking, re-interpreting and reformulating the understanding of our own faith in a way that is congruent with the tradition of Christian self-reflection and theological development that has existed since the very beginnings of Christianity. This is, of course, a mutual process, and just as Christians may be transformed by their encounter with the religious other, so authentic interreligious engagement may also pose to such others challenges which can lead to transformation. (World Council of Churches 2014, 4)

42. “We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time, we cannot set limits to the saving power of God ... We appreciate this tension, and do not attempt to resolve it” [San Antonio Statement, CWME, para. 26 and 29]. We see Christ as a specific saving gift to all creation, not a replacement for or denial of God’s presence and power through many other means. Christ embodies God’s generosity toward humanity. Christians point toward this event as their hope, not toward Christianity as the source of salvation. Christians are called to testify to this hope. “We need to acknowledge that human limitations and limitations of language make it impossible for any community to have exhausted the mystery of the salvation God offers to humankind... It is this humility that enables us to say that salvation belongs to God, God only. We do not possess salvation; we participate in it. We do not offer salvation; we witness to it. We do not decide who would be saved; we leave it to the providence of God. For our own salvation is an everlasting ‘hospitality’ that God has extended to us. It is God who is the ‘host’ of salvation” [*Religious Plurality and Christian self-understanding*, WCC, 2005]. (World Council of Churches 2014, 12)

Abraham, the Father of the Abrahamic Religions

The Qur'an and Justice:

In sacrificing his son Ismail (a), Ibrahim (a)—the father of Abrahamic religions—displayed his reliance on God and his obedience to Him. Instead of worshipping the self, he chose to worship God. If we do not accept fideistic interpretations of people like Kierkegaard and rationalistic interpretations of this event, we can still conclude that the reliance on God and the abandonment of selfishness is in the true essence of all monotheistic religions. We see this reliance on God in the prophets that came after Ibrahim (a), such as Musa (a), Isa (a) and Muhammad (s).

It is because of such an approach that the Holy Qur'an recognizes and approves of the cultural and ethnic pluralism amongst various nations. It defines the purpose of this religious multiplicity as the mutual understanding of different ethnicities and races:

O mankind! Indeed we created you from a male and a female and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God wary among you. Indeed Allah is all knowing, all aware (Qur'an 49:13).

And, it also calls for a unified message among the Abrahamic Religions:

Say, "O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we will worship no one but Allah, and that we will not ascribe any partner to Him, and that we will not take each other as lords besides Allah." But if they turn away, say, 'Be witnesses that we are Muslims' (Qur'an 3:64).

The phrase "a word common to us" implies that the Qur'an, the Torah and the Bible all invite to a common *idea*, which is monotheism (Tabataba'i 2003, 3:390).

Piety and the fear of God are the real distinctions of man. They help him achieve his real happiness, which is an eternally blissful life in the proximity of the mercy of his Creator. The one and the only way to reach the felicity in the Hereafter is piety, which, in the light of the felicity in the Hereafter, guarantees a blissful life in this world (Tabataba'i 2003, 18:488).

The Holy Qur'an speaks of a "united community" and describes the prophets (a) as the people who promise this community with the rewards of the Afterlife and threaten them with the punishments of the same.

Mankind were a single community; then Allah sent the prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He sent down with them the Book with the truth, that it may judge between the people concerning that about which they differed, and none differed in it except those who had been given it, after the manifest proofs had come to them, out of envy among themselves. Then Allah guided those who had faith to the truth of what they differed in, by His will, and Allah guides whomever He wishes to a straight path (Qur'an 2:213).

Prophethood is a divine mission. It is a movement that seeks to spread the Divine Word and the reality of religion amongst people. It implies changing human society. This also entails the change of individual human being's lives. This means that their ideas, morals, and actions change. The result of such a change is that these humans attain their real dignity. This is nothing but their real humanity in whose form they were created.

Again, when a community is changed and the social climate is made righteous, freedom and success will be achieved. Thus, man will have naturally evolved. Every individual is given the freedom to benefit from the advantages of life that are the outcome of his way of thinking.

However, when the community as a whole is harmed, he is deprived of his freedom. In the end of the above verse, all of the things mentioned previously are summarized in Islam—the submission to God Almighty and humility to His unseen power. The prophets collectively and individually invite humanity to accept what man naturally wants to accept, i.e. monotheism (Tabataba’i 2003, 3:392).¹

Abraham was the father of all the Abrahamic Religions, and justice is at the heart of his message. His descendants are his just successors, and the reign and territory of God does not include the ruthless:

And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them, He said, ‘I am making you the Imam of mankind.’ Said he, ‘And from among my descendants?’ He said, ‘My pledge does not extend to the unjust.’ (Qur’an 2:124)

God orders us to be just, even to the ruthless. He asks his believing servants to be fair, because it is closer to piety. The Qur’an says:

O you who have faith! Be maintainers, as witnesses for the sake of Allah, of justice, and ill feeling for people should never lead you to be unfair. Be fair; that is nearer to God wariness, and be wary of Allah. Allah is indeed well aware of what you do. (Qur’an 5:8)

By saying, “To you your religion and to me my religion,” the Qur’an instructs us not to commit violence when we confront infidels. Hence, it shows the fundamental difference between Islam and infidelity.

In the Name of Allah, the All beneficent, the All merciful. Say, “O faithless ones! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship; nor will I worship what you have worshipped. nor will you worship what I worship. To you your religion and to me my religion.” (Qur’an 109)

The Qur'an invites human beings to form a moderate community in which violence is prohibited and moderation is commendable.

After having clarified the current status of world religions and the genealogy of the Abrahamic Religions, I shall now briefly explore the obstacles of theological dogmatism and the philosophical obstacles to interreligious dialogues.

Philosophical Impediments to Religious Dialogue

The intellectual history of humanity began with a struggle between realism and relativism. In his thesis *The Unity of Virtue with Knowledge* Socrates argues that the only way to nurture good ethical traits in a society and to achieve happiness in this way is by means of knowledge about what is truly ethical. Consequently, he concluded that the Sophists, who adhered to relativism, were the greatest enemies of ethics.

In a different panorama, relativism is also the enemy of ethics: there is a mutual correlation between relativism and violence. To the same extent, there is a mutual relation between realism and tolerance (Popper 1994).

Relativism rejects the inter-subjective aspect of reality that is shared between various minds, because it does not believe in a reality independent of them; hence, it refuses the possibility of any dialogue based on common axioms. Every person is confined to his own culture and cognizance. In such an environment, dialogue between two people is as unlikely and far-fetched as a dialogue between two completely different worlds. It will be impossible to understand and solve problems. What is more, it will be impossible to compare two distinct solutions. If one cannot understand the solutions available, how could one choose the one that is the best?

An essential condition for the possibility of dialogue is the recognition of realism and the existence of inter-subjective realities, but not necessarily the ideal Platonic facts. Only then can there be a dialogue. On the contrary, if realism is denied, it will open the door to violence. When we are unable to resolve disputes through reasoning and epistemic facts based on inter-subjective realities and axioms, objectivity will be replaced by violence and bullying.

In contrast to the Sophists, Socrates spoke of dialogue and considered it his divine duty in the Delphi temple to deny any type of dogma by means of dialogue. In this way, real knowledge, i.e. permissible and justified beliefs, would be attained. Most of his early exchanges, following his rational assessments, often led to his uttering the phrase “I don't know” (Benson 1992). In fact, the sentence “I do not know” has eased the transition from violence, which stems from egocentrism, to tolerance, which stems from theo-centrism. This is harmonious with these verses of the Holy Qur'an”

They have taken their scribes and their monks as lords besides Allah, and also Christ, Mary's son; though they were commanded to worship only the One God, there is no god except Him; He is far too immaculate to have any partners that they ascribe [to Him]! (Qur'an 9:31)

Say, “O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we will worship no one but Allah, and that we will not ascribe any partner to Him, and that we will not take each other as lords besides Allah.” But if they turn away, say, “Be witnesses that we are Muslims.” (Qur'an 3:64)

Thus, one of the prerequisites of religious dialogue is the rejection of sophistic relativism and the acceptance of Socratic realism.

Theological Impediments to Religious Dialogue

The traditional idea that salvation is exclusively reserved for the followers of a specific religion is a serious hindrance to religious

dialogue. According to exclusivist views, the beliefs of the adherents of other religions are false. What is more, they will not attain eschatological salvation (Aijaz 2014, 77-88). In the exclusivist point of view, salvation only belongs to a specific religion; therefore, exclusivist perspectives tend to make dialogue impossible. Any dialogue between religions must be based on the assumption that there are two identities and two horizons, different but equal. In the exclusivist perspective, dialogue turns into a monologue, and the inter-subjective argument is nullified. Consequently, the rejection of an inter-subjective argument paves the way for violence.

Conclusion

The formation of multi-religious societies in which no particular religion is dominant has forced intellectuals and theologians to reconsider the issue of salvation and to clarify their stances on it. Previously, religions did not take each other very seriously. However, theologians have realized that in the pluralistic world of this era, religions need to be united and that this unity cannot be achieved without overcoming those philosophical and theological problems and doctrines that previously separated religions (Smith 1981).

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