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Interreligious Dialogue: A Framework for Peaceful Coexistence and Societal Harmony

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the importance of interreligious dialogue in achieving peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies, with a specific focus on Islam's role. As global interconnectivity increases, the intersection of diverse religious communities calls for a framework of understanding and cooperation. This study delves into both historical and modern instances of interreligious engagement involving Islamic traditions, illustrating how such dialogues foster societal harmony. Key aspects of Islam, such as the principles of peace (*Salaam*), compassion (*Rahma*), and justice (*Adl*), are explored in the context of interfaith interactions. By examining these principles alongside practices that underpin effective interreligious dialogue, the paper shows how mutual respect and understanding among different faith communities can create a more cohesive and harmonious society. Furthermore, the research explores the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting pluralism and suggest strategies to enhance interfaith interactions. Through an extensive review of literature and case studies, the paper highlights the essential role of interreligious dialogue in bridging cultural and religious divides, ultimately contributing to global peace and unity.

Key Words: Interreligious Dialogue, Coexistence, Islam, Pluralistic society, Harmony.

Introduction

The advocacy for interfaith dialogue represents a conspicuous and progressively popular phenomenon in contemporary discussions on religion[1]. This underscores the importance of interreligious dialogue in fostering mutual understanding among diverse communities. Interfaith dialogue stands out as a pivotal element in comparative religion studies, with its significance particularly pronounced in pluralistic societies. The intrinsic connection between pluralism and a religion's foundational elements, encompassing concepts of God, belief, rituals, religious practices, ethics, and cultures, highlights its undeniable importance.[2]

Initiatives promoting interfaith dialogue are deemed indispensable for the holistic development, survival, and ethical elevation of humanity in the future.[3] The multifaceted significance of interfaith dialogue, often manifested as "*theological dialogue*," extends beyond facilitating the comprehension and transmission of religious knowledge. It also serves as a conduit for revealing a profound understanding of what it truly means to live and embody one's faith.[4] The pressing need of the hour is to scrutinize interfaith dialogue through the prism of Islāmic Sharī 'ah, emphasizing a comprehensive examination.[5]

a.   Definition of Dialogue

The term "dialogue" originates from the Greek word "*dialogos*," where "*dia*" means "through" and "*logos*" means "word." Hence, dialogue is a communication method through words.[6] It is defined as a conversation, talk, debate, discussion, consultation, or conference involving two or more parties. This term is commonly employed in intellectual discussions and presentations across various philosophies.

Arabic dictionaries define dialogue as *"Al-Ḥiwār,"* a term used thrice in the Qur'ān[7], conveying the same meaning as a conversation, discussion between two or more parties, and an exchange of thoughts and ideas aimed at correcting mistakes, providing arguments, establishing facts, and responding to

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[1] Hasan. A. H. H. (2011). *An Islamic Perspective of the Interfaith Dialogue amidst Current Inter-religious Tensions Worldwide. GJAT.* 1. p. 1.

[2] Karim, K. M., & Saili, S. A. (2009). Inter- Faith Dialogue: The Qur'anic and Prophetic Perspective. *Journal Usuluddin*. Bil 29. pp.65-94.

[3] Hasan. A. H. H. (2011). Ibid.

[4] Haney. M. S. (2009). Envisioning Islam: Imam Mohammed and Interfaith Dialogue. *The Muslim World*. 99.

[5] Qasmi, M. (2013). *The Phenomenon of Interfaith Dialogue & Islamic Shari"ah*. Seminar on "Shariah Methods of Interfaith Dialogue". pp.1-9

[6] David, B. (2017). Difficult dialogues. Clark University. https://www2.clarku.edu/difficultdialogues/learn/index.cfm.

[7] Al- Qur'ān. Al-Kahf:34; Al-Kahf:37 & Al-Mujādila:1.

incorrect viewpoints.[8] Summarily, the definition of dialogue encompasses a formal, prearranged conversation, taking place in a controlled environment with participants holding differing perspectives, conducted with open minds and pp. 608-634. due respect, and aiming to facilitate listening, learning, understanding, and the exchange of ideas for the benefit of one or more individuals.[9]

b. The Islāmic Approach to Interreligious Dialogue

The world exhibits diverse characteristics, a design attributed to Allah in Islam for the greater benefit of humankind. The Qur'ān asserts that if God had willed, humanity could have been a single community,[10] emphasizing that diversity is part of God's plan. Muslims are called to embrace these differences with love, cooperation, and mutual understanding.[11]

Islam advocates for peace and harmony, evident in the Muslim greeting *"As-salamu- 'alaykum"* (peace be upon you)[12]. The Prophet of Islam is recognized as "*rahmatan lil- 'alamin*" (mercy for the entire world),[13] and God is acknowledged as *rabbil 'alamin"* (the cherisher of the entire world)[14] All revelations are acknowledged by Muslim scholars.[15]

According to Islāmic teachings, there wasn't a single system for all of humanity. God sent a Prophet to each community, and various Prophets were designated for different communities, with no discrimination between them.[16] Having faith in all Prophets is a fundamental belief in Islam.[17] Islam warns against disbelief in God and His Prophets, emphasizing the continuation of all previously revealed religions. Islam embraces all Prophets from various traditions (e.g., Prophet Noah as the submitter and Prophet Ibrahim as a Muslim.[18]

The term "*Islam*" in the Qur'ān refers to the prophetic tradition of monotheism, encompassing all monotheistic religions. Christians and Jews are honoured as the people of the Revealed Book, and the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) is linked to the lineage of Ibrahim through his son Isma'il.[19] Islam's inclusiveness is evident in recognizing other people's faiths, rights, and dignity, incorporating certain laws from previous scriptures and pre-Islāmic customs, as long as they align with Qur'ānic teachings.[20]

The Prophet of Islam practiced divine guidance by visiting the ill, showing sympathy to people of other faiths, and refraining from compelling non-Muslims to adhere to Islāmic laws in Madinah.[21] A notable example is when Jewish scholars sought judgment on an adultery case, and the Prophet respected their request by applying Jewish scripture.[22] The Prophet's rule in Madinah serves as a living example of solidarity, peace, and interreligious harmony.[23] The followers of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) comprehended and embraced his ideals, as historical records affirm the equitable and compassionate treatment of non-Muslims in numerous Islāmic societies.[24]

2. Importance of Dialogue

Religions hold a crucial role in shaping our perspectives, beliefs, values, and principles for living. Each individual and group is inspired and guided by their understanding of the divine, prompting unique engagements with the world.

A. Mitigating Religious Fundamentalism and Communalism

Interfaith dialogue stands as a crucial tool in preventing the emergence of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, which, if unchecked, can lead to religious communalism and its destructive consequences such as arson, looting, violence, and property damage. Sinister forces driven by self-interest actively promote religious extremism to sow division and incite communal disharmony. In contrast, interfaith dialogue provides a platform where individuals from diverse religious backgrounds can convene, engage in discussions about their respective faiths, address uncertainties, foster mutual understanding, and cultivate relations between

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[8] Humaid, S. B. (2010). Islam and dialogue with the other. In Humaid, S. B. (Ed.), Interfaith dialogue: Cross- cultural views. pp. 24–48. Ghainaa Publications.

[9] Karim, K. M., & Saili, S. A. (2009). pp.65-94.

[10] Al- Qur'ān 5: 48.

[11] Kurucan, A., & Erol, M. K. (2012). Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an-Sunnah- history. London: Dialogue Society.p.37.

[12] Tirmidhi, M. I. I. (1998). Sunan-al-Tirmidhi. Vol. 4. Dar al-Garb al-Islam. p. 349.

[13] Al- Qur'ān 21: 107.

[14] Al- Qur'ān 1: 1.

[15] Haq, M. Z. (2014). Muslims participation in interfaith dialogue: Challenges and opportunity. Journal of Ecumenical Studies. 49(4). pp.613–646.

[16] Al- Qur'ān 22: 67; 2: 285.

[17] Al- Qur'ān 4: 136; 4: 164

[18] Al- Qur'ān 10: 72; 3: 67.

[19] Nor, M. R. M., Khan, I., & Elius, M. (2018). Analysing the conceptual framework of religious freedom and interreligious relationship in Islam. Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies, 2(8), 309-334. https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims. v8i2. pp. 309-334.

[20] See Baker, O. (2006). The Qur''an on interfaith and inter-civilizational dialogue: Interpreting a divine message for twentieth century humanity. International institute of Islamic Thought Malaysia (IIITM) and Institute for the Study of the Ummah and Global Understanding (ISUGO).

[21] Al-Masud, A., & Elius, M. (2016). The Qur''anic view of interreligious dialogue and harmony. International Journal of Recent Research in Social Sciences and Humanities. 3. pp. 18–21.

[22] Al-Bukhari, M. I. (2000). *Sahih Al-Bukhari*.(In Bukhri in Encyclopedia of Six Novel Hadith Books). Riyaḍ: Dar al-Salam.p.303

[23] Kurucan, A., & Erol, M. K. (2012). Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an-Sunnah- history. London: Dialogue Society. p.74.

[24] Kurucan, A., & Erol, M. K. (2012). pp.85.

different religious communities. This proactive engagement helps mitigate tensions and conflicts that may arise among various religious groups.[25]

B. Deepening Understanding of One's Own Religion

Engaging in interreligious dialogue proves instrumental in gaining a deeper understanding of one's own religion within the context of pluralism. It offers opportunities to clarify doubts regarding other religions, encouraging a visitation of scriptures, doctrines, and dogmas in light of pluralistic perspectives. This process creates a conducive environment for the reinterpretation of religious tenets, fostering strength and wisdom in understanding and re- evaluating dogmas, doctrines, and scriptures in the pluralistic landscape.

C. Enabling the Enrichment of One's Religion

Interfaith dialogue serves as a platform for the enrichment of one's own religion. Through dialogue, exclusive claims of superiority within a particular faith lose significance in the presence of other religions. Adherents, through dialogue, cultivate openness and broad- mindedness, developing respect for other faiths. This educational process encourages theological exploration, ultimately leading to the creation of new insights about other faiths. The result is a more profound appreciation and respect for the meaning and truth revealed in various faith traditions.

D. Fostering Mutual Enrichment

Interfaith dialogue plays a pivotal role in facilitating mutual growth and development among different religions. Through this dialogue, each religion contributes to and supports the enrichment of others. The space provided by interfaith dialogue allows religions to address doubts, misconceptions, and misunderstandings, thereby contributing to the development and growth of one another. This positive and essential dimension becomes particularly significant within the context of pluralism. In contrast to historical antagonism between religions, interfaith dialogue transforms the dynamic by fostering collaboration and mutual enhancement.

E. Dispelling Misunderstandings and Misconceptions

Interfaith dialogue serves as a powerful means to dispel misunderstandings and misconceptions that surround different faiths. Often, unintentional misconceptions are created about other faiths, and dialogue provides the space for their clarification and removal. The tensions that arise between religions due to these misunderstandings are also alleviated through dialogue. The prevailing theories predicting clashes between civilizations, cultures, and religions lose their significance when we witness the potential for unity and fellowship between religions through interfaith dialogue. This new climate of dialogue opens doors for non-confrontational discussions about the practices of neighbours' religions, dispelling clouds of suspicion and apprehension and ushering in a fresh breeze of open-minded reception to other faiths.

3. Major Challenges in the Path of Constructive Dialogue

Examining significant historical events such as the Crusades, the Muslim expulsion from Spain, and the impact of the conquest of Constantinople on the Western imagination, one might envision a strained Muslim-Christian dialogue. However, it is crucial not to let these unfavourable historical episodes prejudice the dialogue between Muslims and Christians in contemporary settings. Disregarding the influence of such historical memories on the psyche of Muslims and Christians during present-day conversations would be unproductive.

Similar considerations apply to Jewish-Muslim dialogue, where one cannot overlook the impact of the Israel-Palestine friction and the events of 1967,[26] including the Arab-Israeli Six- Day War, on the collective psyche of Jews and Muslims. A careful analytical review of these historical encounters reveals that practical aspects, rather than religious differences, largely shaped these events, with socio-economic and political factors[27] playing a prominent role. It becomes evident that a continuous respect for "other" cultures has persisted throughout human history.[28] The challenge lies in embracing an anthropological approach to respect diverse cultures while considering the historical context of encounters and dialogues. Theological and inter-faith dialogues persist within theology and religions, raising the question of how to navigate the psychological impact of historical confrontations.

The Muslim perspective on dialogue faces a significant challenge due to contemporary incidents that dangerously demonize Islam and Muslims. Often, crucial historical events that shaped the modern Middle East, such as the Sykes-Picot agreement, the USA vs. USSR rivalry, the American misuse of Taliban forces, the Balfour Declaration, the creation of Israel, Operation Desert Fox, the War on Terror, the Kashmir problem, and Western interests in Middle East oil refineries and the war industry, are overlooked. Instead, a simplistic view, focusing solely on religion (Islam), becomes the easy cause attributed to complex and carefully orchestrated conflicts.[29]

The post-9/11 era witnessed a surge in anti-Muslim rhetoric and discrimination, fostering Islamophobia in the West. Western Muslims, and Muslims worldwide, have become targets of discriminatory social and political actions. Events like the Paris attack in 2016 added to the confusion and misinformation about Muslims, leading to the growing wild imagination about them. Muslims are subjected to random security checks at airports, making them uncomfortable and contributing to heightened religious identities, creating a sense of siege where Muslims feel compelled to believe anything to

[25] Vincent Sekhar, "Give Away Violence, Preserve Life – Call of the Sramana Religions", in Journal of Dharma, Vol.25, No.2 (April-June, 2000), pp.162-164.

[26] Collin Turner, Islam-The Basic, Routledge, London, 2006.

[27] Jane Idleman Smith explores the dynamics of interfaith dialogue in her work, "Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue," specifically in pp. 50-55.

[28] See Jessica Stern, ISIS; The State of Terror, William Collins, UK, 2015

[29] On media maligning the facts and its duplicity see; Edward Said, Covering Islam, Vintage books, London, 1997.

which they are inclined. This alienation perpetuates a cycle of violence in Western societies. Despite these challenges, there has been an increase in dialogue initiatives post-9/11. Influential Muslim scholars like Farid Esack, Ismail al Faruqui, Said Hussain Nasr, Muhammad Fathi Osman, Khalid Abd El Fadl, Muhammad Ayub, Zahid Bukhari, and Tariq Ramadan have actively promoted interfaith dialogue.[30]

The emergence of the Islāmic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), gaining significant attention in religious and global contexts, is intricately linked to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime, and statements by Vladimir Putin suggesting support for ISIS from various countries. The involvement of powerful nations like Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Saudi Arabia in countering ISIS and the Assad Regime requires a thorough analysis of international conflicts and strategies. The widespread displacement, casualties, and distressing media scenes raise questions about whether the issue is solely related to Islam or involves additional dimensions not fully understood. The concept of a caliphate, exploited by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and jihadists, envisions a world governed by Islāmic Shariah law. Despite Islam being ostensibly portrayed as the driving force behind ISIS, many of its activities contradict Islāmic teachings and have led to a negative perception of Islam, fuelled by media coverage amplifying Islamophobia. Consequently, Muslims engaging in dialogue often find themselves compelled to explain and disassociate from these acts, expending considerable effort defining what Islam is not.[31]

The use of language in the media and academia, such as terms like Islamist and Islamism, introduces challenges. Some Islamists advocate for democracy, while *Salafis* and *Wahabis* may oppose groups like ISIS. The misunderstanding of Islāmic ideologies by the media has led to the proliferation of literature associating fundamentalism and extremism with Wahhabism. The confusion surrounding sects and ideologies within Muslim theology, exacerbated by the rise of violent organizations in the name of Islam, forces Muslims into a position of justifying their faith.[32]

The religious dimension in modern wars and conflicts poses a significant challenge to dialogue. Scholars like Karen Armstrong advocate for an anthropological approach to respecting the "other." Armstrong challenges the prevailing myth that conflicts are solely motivated by religion, emphasizing that every religion has mechanisms for regulating conflict, including Islam.[33]

4. Navigating Interreligious Dialogue: Overcoming Contemporary Challenges

In a world characterized by diverse cultures, beliefs, and ideologies, the necessity for interreligious dialogue remains pivotal despite the formidable challenges it encounters. This imperative is grounded in the profound differences among various religious traditions, differences that, if unaddressed, have the potential to breed discord and misunderstanding.

The contemporary world is marred by historical grievances, geopolitical tensions, and socio- economic disparities that are often exacerbated by religious affiliations. Events such as the Crusades, the expulsion of Muslims from Spain, and geopolitical conflicts like the Israel- Palestine friction contribute to a narrative fostering scepticism and mistrust between religious communities. However, it is crucial not to let the shadows of the past dictate present-day interactions. The call for interreligious dialogue goes beyond unpleasant historical episodes, acknowledging that meaningful conversations are hindered when overshadowed by the baggage of historical confrontations.

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging signs of progress. Scholars, leaders, and organizations, both Muslim and non-Muslim, actively advocate for interfaith dialogue. Initiatives like declarations of mutual understanding, collaborative projects, and educational programs in universities indicate a growing awareness of fostering positive relations among diverse religious communities. In nutshell, while challenges persist, the necessity for interreligious dialogue remains unwavering. Through open and respectful conversations, acknowledgment of historical complexities, and a commitment to dispelling stereotypes, societies can move beyond the shadows of the past, building bridges of understanding for a harmonious future.

Let's Explore the few current initiatives—projects, organizations, conferences—implemented globally by Muslims (particularly) and non -Muslims to promote successful interreligious dialogue provides valuable insights into the collective efforts aimed at fostering meaningful conversations among diverse faith traditions.

1. **Pope Francis's Interfaith Initiatives:** Pope Francis has been actively involved in interfaith dialogue, engaging with leaders from various religious traditions. His efforts include meetings with leaders of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and other faiths to promote understanding and collaboration.

2. **King Abdullah International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID):** Established in 2012 in Vienna, Austria, KAICIID is an international organization that focuses on fostering dialogue and understanding among followers of different religions. It brings together religious leaders, policymakers, and scholars.

3. **United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC):** The UNAOC, launched in 2005, works to promote dialogue and cooperation among different cultures and religions. It emphasizes the importance of mutual respect and understanding in addressing global challenges.

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[30] Andrew Hosken, Empire of Fear; inside the Islamic State, one world Publications, London, 2015.
[31] Examine news articles and recent publications in newspapers such as The Guardian and The Independent, where headlines have been dominated by discussions about ISIS. Numerous books have explored the concerns surrounding the emergence of ISIS and its potential connections to Islamic revival movements, including movements inspired by figures like Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab.
[32] Karen Armstrong: Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence, The Bodley Head, London, 2014.
[33] Alija Izetbegovic, Islam between East and West, American Trust Publications, USA, 1993.

4. **The Marrakesh Declaration:** In 2016, Muslim scholars and leaders gathered in Marrakesh to issue the Marrakesh Declaration, which emphasizes the rights of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries. It reflects a commitment to pluralism and protection of religious diversity.

5. **National Interfaith Week (UK):** The UK annually observes National Interfaith Week, where various events and activities are organized to promote dialogue, cooperation, and understanding among people of different faiths.

6. **Parliament of the World's Religions:** The Parliament of the World's Religions is a major interfaith event that takes place periodically at different locations worldwide. The most recent one at the time of my last update was held in Toronto, Canada, in 2018. The Parliament brings together leaders and representatives from various religious traditions to discuss global issues, promote understanding, and work towards peace and sustainability.

5. CONCLUSION

In short, the examination of interreligious dialogue in the contemporary era, with a specific focus on Islam, underscores the challenges and the urgent need to cultivate understanding and collaboration among diverse religious communities. The historical burdens of conflicts, geopolitical tensions, and socio-economic inequalities have overshadowed the potential for dialogue, emphasizing the importance of not allowing these obstacles to shape the narrative of present-day interactions. The Muslim standpoint on interfaith dialogue confronts various challenges, notably the vilification of Islam following significant global events. The media's tendency to oversimplify complex geopolitical issues and attribute conflicts solely to religious motives compounds the difficulties faced by Muslims in fostering positive interfaith relations. Nevertheless, there are commendable initiatives and strides indicating progress. Scholars, leaders, and organizations, encompassing both Muslim and non-Muslim entities, actively promote interfaith dialogue through declarations of mutual understanding, collaborative projects, and educational programs.

The imperative for interreligious dialogue endures, necessitating open and respectful conversations, an acknowledgment of historical intricacies, and a dedication to dispelling stereotypes. Through these efforts, societies can transcend the shadows of the past, constructing bridges of comprehension and cooperation for a harmonious future.