

Reflections on Inter/Intra-faith Dialog and Promotion of World Peace in the Light of Muslim Heritage

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Abstract

The benefits of interfaith dialog are improved understanding of the “Other,” opportunities to forge coalitions on mutual concerns, opportunities for peacemaking, and most importantly, the potential for a deeper understanding of our own faith tradition. The challenges posed by interfaith dialog are the threat of alienation through frustrated attempts at proselytization, the dilution of the contending faith systems into an emasculated common denominator, and the perception of threats to the participants’ religious identities.

Islamic texts and tradition provide the framework for a meaningful interfaith dialog that can achieve the goals and manage the problems. They suggest the framework not of a value-compromised Creolized religion, but of a rational meta-religion that does not seek to compete with the constituent religions in dialog, but to serve as a forum in which the benefits are maximized and the threats neutralized.

We review the specific advice offered in the Qur’an on how to engage in interfaith dialog, whether with people of the book, *kufâr* or anything in between. We then survey the approach taken by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and consider how changes in circumstances and place may affect their application today. We consider instances from Muslim history selected for their instructiveness and utility. Finally we review recent cases of interfaith (and intra-faith) dialog to which we have been a party for anecdotal evidence bearing on the subject, and conclude with some guidelines for maximizing the productivity of such encounters.

Introduction

The benefits of interfaith dialog are improved understanding of the “Other,” opportunities to forge coalitions on mutual concerns, opportunities for peacemaking, and, most importantly, the potential for a deeper understanding of our own faith tradition. The challenges posed by interfaith dialog are the threat of alienation through frustrated attempts at proselytization, the dilution of the contending faith systems into an emasculated common denominator, and the perception of threats to the participants’ religious identities. In considering interfaith dialog it is important to realize that interfaith activity is in itself a form of interfaith dialog. When we join together with people of other faith traditions to cooperate, or to complete, in the doing of good works, we are engaged in a dialog of deeds that informs them, and us, of our actual beliefs and priorities. Belief is not just a matter of words, but of action. As the Prophet said, we are not believers if we do not want for our brothers what we want for ourselves.

Muslim involvement in interfaith dialog has had its ups and downs in history. This has been due to changing circumstances both in the relationships between Muslims and their neighbors and in the Muslims themselves, by which I mean the level of their understanding of the religion of Islam. Islamic texts and tradition provide the framework for a meaningful interfaith dialog that can achieve the goals and manage the problems. They suggest the framework not of a value-compromised creolized religion, but of a rational meta-religion that does not seek to compete with the constituent religions in dialog, but to serve as a forum in which the benefits are maximized and the threats neutralized.

In this paper, we review the specific advice offered in the Qur’an on how to engage in interfaith dialog. We then survey the approach taken by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and consider how changes in circumstances and place may affect their application today. We consider instances from Muslim history selected for their instructiveness and utility. Finally we review recent cases of interfaith (and intra-faith) dialog to which we have been a party for anecdotal evidence bearing on the subject, and conclude with some guidelines for maximizing the productivity of such encounters.

The Qur’an on Interfaith Dialog

The Qur’an has more to say about interfaith issues than can be reviewed in this paper. I shall therefore restrict my attention to Qur’anic injunctions specific to dialog with people of other faiths, whether with people of the book, *kufâr* or anything in between.

Benefit maximization and threat minimization

The Qur’an wants dialog to be an opportunity for truth to emerge rather than the opening of a door to harm either Muslims or their interlocutors and offers practical advice to maximize the benefits and minimize threats:

Say: "O People of the Book! You have no ground to stand upon unless you stand fast by the Law the Gospel and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord." It is the revelation that comes to you from thy Lord that increases in most of them their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy. But sorrow not over (these) people without Faith. (5:68)

And dispute not with the People of the Book except with means better (than mere disputation) unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say "We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)." (29:46)

Not your desires nor those of the people of the Book (can prevail): whoever works evil will be requited accordingly. Nor will he find besides God any protector or helper. If any do deeds of righteousness be they male or female and have faith they will enter heaven and not the least injustice will be done to them. Who can be better in religion than one who submits his whole self to God does good and follows the way of Abraham the true in faith? For God did take Abraham for a friend. But to God belong all things in the heavens and on earth: and He it is that encompasses all things. (4:123-126)

So if they dispute with you say: "I have submitted my whole self to God and so have those who follow me." And say to the people of the Book and to those who are unlearned: "Do you (also) submit yourselves?" If they do they are in right guidance but if they turn back your duty is to convey the Message; and in God's sight are (all) His servants. (3:20)

No proselytization.

Although Muslims are encouraged to engage in "da`wa," that is, to invite people to Islam, this is not that same as browbeating people into accepting a faith of which they have not been persuaded. The advice given to Muslims on how to approach non-Muslims and on how to respond to the proslytization of others demonstrates the distinction between "inviting" people to the truth and bullying them:

They say: "Become Jews or Christians if you would be guided (to salvation)." Say "Nay! (I would rather) the religion of Abraham the true and he joined not gods with God."(2:135)

(Both) the Jews and the Christians say: "We are sons of God and His beloved." Say: "Why then does He punish you for your sins? Nay you are but men of the men He has created: He forgives whom He pleases and He punishes whom He pleases: and to God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth and all that is between: and unto Him is the final goal (of all)." (5:15-18)

Those who believe (in the Qur'an) and those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures) and the Christians and the Sabians and who believe in God and the last day and work righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve. (2:62; 5:69)

Those who believe (in the Qur'an) those who follow the Jewish (scriptures) and the Sabians Christians Magians and Polytheists God will judge between them on the Day of Judgment: for God is witness of all things. (22:17)

Say: O you that reject Faith! I worship not that which you worship. Nor will you worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which you have been wont to worship. Nor will you worship that which I worship. To you be your Way and to me mine. (109:1-6).

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Rational meta-religion

In order to engage in dialog at all one must start from whatever common ground one shares. To insist on the validity of one's professions on the grounds that "it is so because my holy book says so," when speaking to one who doubts the divine origin or integrity of the text cited is a futile exercise at best, and at worst raises questions about the speaker's grasp of the rules of logic. Thus, this advice from the Qur'an:

The Jews say: "The Christians have naught (to stand) upon"; and the Christians say: "The Jews have naught (to stand) upon." Yet they (profess to) study the (same) Book. Like unto their word is what those say who know not but God will judge between them in their quarrel on the Day of Judgment. (2:113)

Say: "O people of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not from among ourselves Lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back say: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's will)."

You people of the Book! why dispute about Abraham when the Law and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have you no understanding? Ah! You are those who fell to disputing (even) in matters of which you had some knowledge! but why dispute in matters of which you have no knowledge? It is God Who knows and you who know not!

Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian but he was true in faith and bowed his will to God's (which is Islam) and he joined not gods with God. Without doubt among men the nearest of kin to Abraham are those who follow him as are also this Apostle and those who believe; and God is the Protector of those who have faith.

It is the wish of a section of the People of the Book to lead you astray. But they shall lead astray (not you) but themselves and they do not perceive!

You People of the Book! Why do you reject the Signs of God of which you are (yourselves) witnesses? You People of the Book! Why do you clothe truth with falsehood and conceal the truth while you have knowledge? (3:63-71)

The Example of Albiruni

Albiruni's research on Hinduism makes an interesting case study. It is not merely an issue of comparative religion, but also a matter of interfaith dialog because Al-Biruni, quite properly, engaged in discussions with the Hindus, not relying on textual analysis

and the testimony of third parties alone. Interfaith dialog is indispensable in the study of comparative religion because the engagé is the only reliable source as to the perspective of the believer. Further, Al-Biruni made it explicit that his intention was to write for those Muslims who “want to converse with the Hindus, and to discuss with them the questions of religion, science, or literature, on the very basis of their own civilization.”¹

On the other hand, dialog with polytheists poses problems for the Muslim scholar that are not present in the study of the monotheistic faiths. Al-Biruni “acknowledges the fact that, although the Hindus he met refused to enter into religious arguments, many Muslims forbade any discussion at all on religious matters.”² He resolved this problem by putting Hindu scholars on his payroll to assist him with his research,³ placing their cooperation in a professional framework and insulating them and him from reasonable suspicion of proslytization.

Effect of “9/11” and the Pope Benedict XVI Controversy

Before the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center towers in 2001, the immigrant Muslim community in America was timid about interfaith dialog. My personal observation was that most felt like guests here and did not want to jeopardize the goodwill of their hosts by engaging in a conversation that might be perceived as critical of the native community’s religious beliefs. After the attacks, however, all Muslims and especially the immigrant community became painfully aware of the misunderstandings that silence breeds. There was a brief storm of interest in interfaith dialog that persists, even though the sense of urgency seems to have abated.

The interest in interfaith dialog among Muslims became international on September 12, 2006 when Pope Benedict XVI sparked a controversy⁴ with a lecture entitled “Faith, Reason and the University — Memories and Reflections”⁵ at the University of Regensburg. The Pope ended up distancing himself⁶ from the offending quote: “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and

¹ Edward Sachau, *trans.* Alberuni's India xvii, xix, xxiii. New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993.

² Yaser Amri, “Muslim Intellectual Perception of Hinduism,” History of Indian Muslims (10/31/2001) <http://islamicindia.blogspot.com/2005/10/muslim-intellectual-perception-of.html>. Accessed 11/3/2008.

³ A. I. Makki, “The Life and Travels of Al-Biruni,” (9/15/2002) http://writers.oneummah.net/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=95. Accessed 11/3/2008.

⁴ BBC. “In Quotes: Muslim Reaction to Pope” BBC News. (9/16/06) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5348436.stm> accessed 10/2/2008.

⁵ Loc. cit. The Guardian (9/15/06) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/sep/15/religion.uk>. Accessed 10/6/2008.

⁶ BBC News, *Pope Sorry for Offending Muslims*, (9/17/06) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5353208.stm>. Accessed 10/2/2008.

inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”⁷ These were not his views, the Pope assured Muslims, but those of the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus which appeared in the “*Dialogue Held With A Certain Persian, the Worthy Mouterizes, in Anakara of Galatia.*”⁸

However, the Pope chose this inflammatory quote for a reason. He was trying to contrast what he professes to be the rationality of Christianity against what he posits to be the irrationality of Islam. To achieve this act of intellectual *jui jitsu*, the Pope used a view attributed to the Zahirī Ibn Hazm (whose name he misspells as Ibn Hazn) as representative of Islam as a whole. This only reveals the gap in the Pope’s understanding of Islam. Although he was a previously professor of theology, he is either unaware of (or chooses to ignore) the fact that the extreme position of the Zahirī school that “died out by the fourteenth century”⁹ is no way representative of the Muslims today, almost all of whom belong to one of the surviving Sunni,¹⁰ Shia,¹¹ or Ibadī schools.¹² Modern Muslims take a moderate position on the relationship of reason and faith between the literalism of the Zahirīs and the rationalism of another extinct school, the Mu`tazila.¹³

To the credit of the Muslim community, their response to this provocation was not the usual outburst of violent threats, but a flurry of invitations to the Pope to engage in reasoned dialog. The most remarkable of these came from King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who sponsored an interfaith conference in Spain in July 2008.¹⁴ More such

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Andrew G. Bostam, “The Pope, Jihad and ‘Dialogue’”, *The American Thinker* (9/19/2005) <http://frontpagemagazine.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=C0A47001-7A37-40FB-B963-437CD6DBCA43>. Accessed 10/2/2008.

⁹ Farhat J. Ziader, “Law: Legal Thought and Jurisprudence,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995) 462.

¹⁰ Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali.

¹¹ Jafari, Zaydi, and Ismaili.

¹² The Salafi, Sufi, and Ahmadiyyah movements are not schools (*madhahab*) per se, and their adherents (when not denounced as heretics) and on no account are considered Zahirīs.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the distinction between rationality and rationalism, see Ahmad, Imad-ad-Dean, *Signs in the Heavens: A Muslim Astronomer’s Perspective on Religion and Science*, 2nd ed. (Beltsville: amana, 2006).

¹⁴ King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, “Partners in Humanity: Opening Address at the World Conference on Dialogue,” Common Ground News Service (7/22/2008) <http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=23575&lan=en&sid=1&sp=0>. Accessed 10/6/2008. King Abdullah explained his reasons for calling the conference in his introductory remarks this way:

Mankind is suffering today from a loss of values and conceptual confusion, and is passing through a critical phase which, in spite of all the scientific progress, is witnessing

conferences have been scheduled in Britain, Jordan and Washington, D.C.¹⁵ King Abdullah himself accurately identified the main challenges to interfaith dialog in his introductory remarks at the opening session July 16, 2008:

Most of the past dialogues have failed because they have deteriorated into mutual recrimination focusing on and exaggerating differences in a sterile endeavor that exacerbated rather than mitigated tensions, or because they attempted to fuse religions and creeds on the pretext of bringing them closer together. This is likewise a fruitless effort, since the adherents of every religion are deeply convinced in their faith, and will not accept any alternative thereto. If we wish this historic meeting to succeed, we must focus on the common denominators that unite us, namely, deep faith in God, noble principles, and lofty moral values, which constitute the essence of religion.¹⁶

Subsequently, the Yale Divinity School and Prince Ghazi of Jordan invited “150 Muslim and Christian scholars from 37 countries” for week-long gathering of top Muslim and primarily Protestant leaders to discuss “a common word.”¹⁷ Such dialogs are expected to continue.

Intra-faith Dialog

Examples of intra-faith dialog are more difficult to come by. Just as in politics, one finds the most bitter feuds occur between those with the most similar opinions. However, there was one remarkable recent development in November 2004 when King Abdullah of Jordan and a large assembly of senior scholars produced the “Amman Message”¹⁸ broadly defining Muslims and prohibiting takfir (calling other Muslims “rejecters” of faith).¹⁹ The first point in the summary of the Amman message is summarized as a

a proliferation of crime, an increase in terrorism, the disintegration of the family, subversion of the minds of the young by drug abuse, exploitation of the poor by the strong, and odious racist tendencies. This is all a consequence of the spiritual void from which people suffer when they forget God, and God causes them to forget themselves. There is no solution for us other than to agree on a united approach, through dialogue among religions and civilizations.

¹⁵ See full text of The Madrid Declaration issued at the end of this World Conference on Dialogue (7/18/2008) at <http://www.world-dialogue.org/english/events/final.htm>, accessed 10/6/2008.

¹⁶ Op. Cit.

¹⁷ “Christian and Muslims,” Religion and Ethics Newsweekly #1203. (9/19/2008) <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1203/feature.html> accessed 10/6/2008.

¹⁸ See the official website of the Amman Message (3/1/2007) http://ammanmessage.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=30. Accessed 11/2/2008.

¹⁹ Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, “Muslims Speak Out: What Islam Really Says About Violence, Human Rights, and Other Religions,” On Faith (7/22/2007)

rejection of the practice of *takfir* explicitly as it relates to eight named schools and to all Muslims subscribing to Ashari, Sufi, or Salafi philosophy:

Whosoever is an adherent to one of the four *Sunni* schools (*Mathahib*) of Islamic jurisprudence (*Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi`i* and *Hanbali*), the two *Shi`i* schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*Ja`fari* and *Zaydi*), the *Ibadi* school of Islamic jurisprudence and the *Thahiri* school of Islamic jurisprudence, is a Muslim. Declaring that person an apostate is impossible and impermissible. Verily his (or her) blood, honour, and property are inviolable. Moreover, in accordance with the Shaykh Al-Azhar's *fatwa*, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to the *Ash`ari* creed or whoever practices real *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) an apostate. Likewise, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to true *Salafi* thought an apostate.

Equally, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare as apostates any group of Muslims who believes in God, Glorified and Exalted be He, and His Messenger (may peace and blessings be upon him) and the pillars of faith, and acknowledges the five pillars of Islam, and does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of religion.²⁰

Personal Experience

In March of 2008 I represented the Minaret of Freedom Institute at the Arab and Muslim Youth Summit in Dearborn, Michigan, organized by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), with a special focus on interfaith activity. One of the most important lessons to come out of that encounter was that interfaith *activity* is a form of interfaith dialog. To the degree that Muslim organizations in non-Muslim countries can understand or define their missions in the context of the broader society, they can work cooperatively with non-Muslim organizations with coincident or harmonious missions. This work itself constitutes a form of testimony to Islamic faith. It is easy for Muslim social service organizations to team up with Christian, secular, governmental agencies to help poor and needy people. No clearer common ground exists than that revealed by action towards a common goal.

I recall a rabbi's explanation of sadaqa at an interfaith event held at the National Cathedral to celebrate a grant awarded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for faith-based action in health care. His story of a rabbi's account to his students about the value of charity was *Islamic* in its perspective—quite apart from the similarity in the Hebrew and Arabic terms for the concept—that I couldn't help but realize how Muslim engagement in charity side-by-side with Jews and Christians, as the Qur'an says, to

http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/muslims_speak_out/2007/07/ghazi.html. Accessed 11/2/2008.

²⁰ "The Three Points of the Amman Message," The Official Website of the Amman Message (3/1/2001) http://ammanmessage.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=74. Accessed 11/2/2008.

“strive together (as in a race) toward all that is good”²¹ then the consequence will indeed be as the same verse goes on to say “Wheresoever you are God will bring you together.”²² In fact, the rabbi’s story fits in with any religious tradition. Here is a version from a Zen Buddhist published in the Jain archive of an interfaith website:

In hell, people were led to a banquet hall where food was set out on the tables and they were invited to sit and eat. However, the chopsticks were three feet long, and no one could get the food to their mouths. Angry that they could not eat, they fought over the food, preventing others from having what they could not get themselves.

In heaven, people were also led to the banquet hall, and also invited to sit and eat. Here, too, the chopsticks were three feet long. However, people learned how to use their chopsticks to feed one another, and all were able to feast and be satisfied.²³

For the Abrahamic faiths a promising starting point for interfaith dialog is a comparison of how the different traditions treat the prophets (pbut). I shared the stage with a learned rabbi for a panel on “Prophet Abraham from an Islamic Perspective” in a panel discussion in the series “Children of Abraham, Jews and Muslims in Conversation” at the Islamic Society of Southern Prince George’s County. It was remarkable how many of the Qur’anic stories of the prophets are found in the Rabbinic traditions.

There have been an increasing number of interfaith dialogs with one or another of the “People of the book,” but establishing a successful dialog with both Jews and Christians at the same time has been more of a challenge. This is because of the tendency to quickly drift from general interfaith discussions to particular issues of current events, especially the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. For example, an “[Abraham's Tent](#)” interfaith celebration, film and discussion at the Friends (Quaker) Meeting of Washington, DC, kept veering off into a discussion of the current situation in Palestine, with the Jewish and Muslim participants put in an awkward place by Christian in-fighting that hit a low point when a Christian Zionist in the audience openly declared the Unitarians and Catholics in attendance, and the Quaker hosts as well, to be non-Christians.²⁴

This pitfall was avoided at a successful panel discussion on the “Prophets in the Abrahamic Religions” for the University of Maryland Honors’ Program. Narrowing the

²¹ Qur’an 2:148.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Interfaith Prayers for Peace,” News Notes from Interfaith Space (9/27/2008) <http://www.revdak.com/wordpress/?cat=16>. accessed 10/6/2008.

²⁴ A perhaps even lower note was hit by demonstrators outside the interfaith gathering Quakers co-sponsored in New York with Iranian President Ahmadinejad in attendance. A protestor carried a poster suggesting the Quakers were terrorists by depicting what appeared to be a Bin Ladin look-alike on a box of Quaker Oats.

topic not only focused the discussion effectively but, somewhat counter-intuitively, made it easier for audience members outside the Abrahamic tradition (I'm thinking of a Hindu student) to get into the discussion.

Conversely, there are situations where the political element of activism can also be a source of interfaith cooperation. In August 2007 I met with Christian and Muslim representatives from the West Bank at the offices of the [Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington](#) and heard their concerns over how political fighting there is being misrepresented in the West as an interfaith issue. More recently the Friends of Sabeel—North America and the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation co-hosted a very successful interfaith evening with Naim Ateek, the founder of the Sabeel Center, on “Palestinian Liberation Theology.”²⁵ The pursuit of justice, no less than charitable work, can be an opportunity to “race towards the good.”

The role played by the Minaret of Freedom Institute in intra-faith dialog has been especially important given the special difficulties mentioned in the preceding section. Even the Amman Message involved only religious and political leaders in its preparation. We organized an open Sunni-Shia dialog before a general audience at America University.²⁶ Many with whom we normally collaborate in interfaith dialog advised against our plans or declined to participate because they feared that the event could only lead to more friction rather than understanding. I'm pleased to report that the event was a success. It was followed by (a slightly more restricted) discussion at a regional conference of the Islamic Society of North America (which I was asked to moderate) and then later by the Amman Message described above. My only regret is that the audience at our groundbreaking event was overwhelmingly Shia because so few Sunnis chose to participate. In retrospect, this is to be expected since the majority in such matters rarely believes there is a problem that needs to be addressed. (Thus, programs about gender discrimination are mostly attended by women, and programs about racism find blacks disproportionately represented over whites.) The sequence of events demonstrates the importance of someone taking the first step.

Guidelines for Interfaith and Intra-faith Dialog

Here are some guidelines in order to gain the benefits of interfaith or intra-faith dialog while avoiding the pitfalls:

- Conduct the discussion within a meta-religious framework that accepts the common beliefs of the participants and without prejudice to the differences.

²⁵ Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, “A Palestinian Christian Speaks,” Minaret of Freedom Institute blog (10/6/2008) <http://blog.minaret.org/?p=796>. accessed 10/6/2008.

²⁶ “Sunni-Shia Dialog to Be Held at American University,” Minaret of Freedom Institute press release (2/11/07) <http://www.minaret.org/releases.html>. Accessed 11/2/2008.

- Do not hide your beliefs; but be frank about the differences without being insulting or condescending
- Do not pressure your interlocutors to convert without denying that you would be pleased if they wish to do so
- Listen carefully to what the interlocutors say, seeking not just similarities and differences but insights into how any differences or similarities enhance your understanding of your own faith tradition
- Challenge yourself to understand your interlocutors' religion as they do (this should not challenge your own faith unless that faith is weak or your religion is in error)
- Look for opportunities to make common cause without compromising on principle

Fighting injustice, denouncing oppression, making peace and alleviating poverty are among the many goals on which religious people should be able to collaborate easily.

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