Cultural Diversity and Dialogue in Islam

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1. Introduction

At the threshold of the third millennium, the present-day world is witnessing sweeping changes and attendant dangers that are growing at an ever accelerating pace which rebounds on the stability of human societies and mortgages the world’s peace and security, owing in the main to the adverse effects of the creeping phenomenon of globalization that hews out the world’s cultures on domineering standardized cultural patterns while taking on account of their specificities and particularities, in total disagreement with the basis of joint interaction. The United Nations and such international organizations as the Organization of the Islamic Conference are exerting efforts to press forth inter-cultural dialogue, as a unique alternative of the prevailing culture of violence and exclusion of the other, while globalization is triggering conflicts that jeopardize the culture of dialogue and mutual understanding, in utter breach of the very spirit of the international law and the international conventions that acknowledge the cultural specificities of a nation and a people and guarantee the right of individuals and groups alike to preserve their cultures.

The urge to gear dialogue among peoples and cultures towards serving the universal objectives of the humanity as a whole is strongly felt today more than any other time in the past. It is all the more a pressing need since it is not easy to see why constructive cooperation and actual inter-cultural dialogue have any significance in an ever changing world without the principle of cultural diversity being confirmed as a recognizable fact. In order to build up a common future in which peace, solidarity and coexistence prevail, there is no other alternative but to ground people in dialogue along with the respect and preservation of cultural diversity.

II. Cultural Diversity in Islam

Today more than any time in the past, the world’s religions and cultures are called upon to sustain joint efforts directed towards furthering dialogue and strengthening coexistence in such a way that may benefit one another; while casting away the causes of discord and disdain, on the basis of the universal values
and principles of mercy, love, brotherhood, and mutual respect. It is these universal virtues and principles, which all religions share, that should be sublimated and instilled in the minds and behaviours, as a common heritage of humanity, through a true dialogue among cultures and religions.

In fact, constructive cooperation and actual dialogue among civilizations and cultures should not be conceived of without the principle of cultural diversity being firmly established. Moreover, the clash of civilizations is not a fated fact, because violence and the ignorance of realities as well as the fear of the other are not a predestined fatality. They rather spring up and develop through education and culture which pattern the behaviour and reactions of individuals. Therefore, there is no alternative but dialogue for the preservation of cultural diversity and cultural plurality, and human beings all have to determine on living together with a free will, regardless of their different beliefs.

One can hardly deny the fact that humankind is one as long as all human beings are categorized under the category of humankind without any discrimination of gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, language, colour, culture, faith, ideology, religion, etc. But at the same time, it is also an established fact that this united humankind has manifested diversity in many aspects of life cultural and religious diversity etc.

As Islam is a divine path and embodies a human way of life, so muslims are confident that since culture is the expression of the genius of a people, there is no justification for conceiving of a culture as being either sublime or mean and lowly. Each culture has its own genius, and is distinctly prolific and enlightened, so it is considered that the diversity of religion and culture are a grace bestowed from God, each culture has its own value and enjoys a special status and none can deny the contribution of each culture to the enrichment of universal cultural heritage.

Islamic perspective on diversity of culture can be understood from various Quranic verses, [O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other …] ¹, this verse points to the diversities of male and female, the diversities of every countries and every communities. At the same time it asks all human beings to know and understand others’ cultures. [And among His signs is the creation of heavens and earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily in that are signs for those who know] ². This two Quranic verses show that Islam

¹) Surat Al-Hujurat 49:13

²) Surat Al-’Adha 22:47
accepts differences in the society among human beings, at the same time request the human beings to understand everyone’s different culture and religions and know each other with the dialogue.

Another thing that can be noted in Islamic perspective is, that it does not believe in imposing its own concepts, ideas, institutions and culture on others cultures. This is so, because Islam does not believe in imperialism and Islam totally condemns cultural imperialism. This point can be further elaborated from a few Quranic verses, […] I worship not that which you worship. Nor will you worship that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which you are worshiping. Nor will you worship that which I worship. And to you be your religion and to me my religion] 3), this verse indicates to the recognition of other religions and its diversity of cultures.

III. Dialogue in Islam

There has always been a need for dialogue among civilizations, the events of September 11th 2001 and after have simply reiterated this need. Dialogue literally refers to a conversation between two people. What we have in mind here, however, is more than just or more individuals or parties whose beliefs are informed by differing worldviews. The ultimate aim of such dialogue is to achieve a level of appreciation, understanding, interest and compassion for the views of the other.

The basic premise set by the Quran that governs dealing with the other – people, Muslims or non-Muslims alike – is dialogue and dawah that is ingrained in understanding and persuasion, period. The verses attesting to this fact are too numerous to list but one verse provides a concise summation, [Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and dialogue with them (people) in a way that is best] 4).

The Quran refers to this premise as one of the major bounties and rights Allah has granted to man, [Allah Created man and taught him eloquent speech] 5). And as such, man, is to use this gift of eloquence, a tool of communication, to carry out

2) Surat Ar-Rum 30:22
3) Surat Al-Kafiruna 109:2-6
4) Surat An-Nahl 16:125
the responsibility of dialogue in all matters of difference, which can be many, including religion.  [Let there be no compulsion in religion ...] 6). This two Quranic verses show that Islam does not allow its adherents to compel others to follow religion of Islam and its culture, but Islam leaves it every human being whether he wants to follow or reject. Quran then instructs the Prophet Muhammad and his followers to,  [Say, the truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills, let him disbelieve] 7)  [And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed, all of them entirely, Then are you (O Muhammad) going to compel people so that they become believers] 8) It emphasize what they may or may not do,  [So remind them, you are only one who reminds, you are not meant to compel them] 9), and indicates that it is not a necessary condition for having a dialogue that one side accepts the others’ argument,  [And indeed, it is we or you who are either upon guidance or in clear error. Say, you will not be asked about what we committed, and we will not be asked about what you do. Say, our Lord will bring us together ...] 10)

But the most important element of the Islamic perspective on dialogue is that the basis for it is the acknowledgement of the other and the acceptance of the fact that people had and will continue to have differences,  [And had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind a single nation i.e. one community following one religion, but they will continue to differ among themselves] 11) and,  [And of His signs of the creation of heavens and earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors ...] 12) Furthermore, the Quran reminds us that all people were created from a single Soul,  [O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from one single person, Adam, and from Adam He created many men and women ...] 13) and that

5) Surat Ar-Rahman 55:3-4  
6) Surat Al-Baqarah 2:256  
7) Surat Al-Kahf 18:29  
8) Surat Yunus 10:99  
9) Surat Al-Ghashiyah 88:21-22  
10) Surat Saba 34:24-26  
11) Surat Hud 11:118  
12) Surat Ar-Rum 30:22  
13) Surat An-Nisa 4:1
Allah has honored all of them, [We have honoured the children of Adam ...] 14) It also reminds us that, [O mankind, We have created you male and female and made you nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another... ] 15) Surely, this will not happen unless we respect others, see their, see their human value and appreciate any commonality we share with them no matter how small, [Of the People of the Scripture, Jews and Christians, there are some who indeed believe in Allah and in what has been revealed to you or has been revealed to them, humbling themselves before Allah ...] 16) The dialogue in Islamic view is of three types or levels, at least. The first is the dialogue within one’s self, which takes the form of a continuous discussion between his commanding and blaming parts of his self, for the sake of achieving, inner peace and complete devotion to Allah. Another is the dialogue within the Muslim Ummah espousing the principle of cooperation when in agreement and enduring when differing to achieve a stronger people and a united nation. The third type is the dialogue with non-Muslims, the human being fellows with whom we share this life in this universe, to fulfill the purpose of being the successors (Khulafaa) in this Earth who strive to minimize evil and harm and maximize the common good for mankind.

When Allah created Adam, a wonderful dialogue was exchanged between Him and the dutiful angels. That dialogue has gained immortality and will continue to be recited until the Day of Judgement. Allah says, [And mention, O Muhammad, when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority.' They said, 'Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You? Allah said, Indeed, I know that which you do not know. And He taught Adam the names – all of them. Then He showed them to the angels and said, 'Inform Me of the names of these, of you are truthful. They said, Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the Knowing, the Wise. He said, O Adam, inform them of their names. And when he had informed them of their names, He said, Did I not tell you that I know the unseen aspects of the heavens and the earth? And I know what you reveal and what you have concealed] 17)

14) Surat Al-Isra 17:70
15) Surat Al-Hujrat 49:13
16) Surat An-Nisa 3:199
Dialogue is part of the example set by Prophets, in dealing with their people. Allah also bestowed on Prophet Abraham, the power to argue convincingly and irrefutably, and support his argument with clear evidence. Allah says, [And that was Our conclusive argument that We gave Abraham against his people. We raise by degrees whom We will] 18)

As for Prophet Muhammad, the story of his life is full of situations where he argues with his people and submits his evidence. He applied the following injunction of Allah better than anybody else, [Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best] 19) It suffices to cite one of the numerous examples in the following text from his biography.

The Makkans sent Utbah ibn Rabiah to make offers to Prophet Muhammad, in the hope that some of them would be accepted and the Prophet would then get what material things he desired. Utbah arrived, sat down with the Prophet and said, "Nephew of mine, you enjoy among us the high status in your clan and the position in lineage that you are aware of. You have brought your people something very serious, with which you divided their community, discredited their discretion, disgraced their gods and their religion, and described their deceased forefathers as unbelievers. Therefore, I am making you certain offers that you may examine and hopefully accept some," the Prophet said, "Speak, Abu Alwalid, and I will listen." Utbah said, "Nephew of mine, if by this thing that you came up with you are after money, we will collect some from our funds until you have more money than any of us. If it is honor you are after, we will make you our master and make no decision unless you are with us and if it is kingship, then we will make you our king. If this that you get is some hallucination, which you see and cannot shut off, we will seek medical treatment for you and pay for it until we get you cured."

When Utbah had finished, the Prophet said, "Are you finished, Abu Alwalid?"
"Yes," he said. "Then Listen to me," said the Prophet.
"I will," he said. The Prophet said, "In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful: "Ha, Mim. These letters are one of the miracles of the Quran, and none but Allah alone knows their meanings. This is a revelation from the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful- a Book whose verses have been detailed,

17) Surat Al-Baqarah 2:30-33
18) Surat Al-Anam 6:83
19) Surat An-Nahl 16:125
an Arabic Quran, for a people who know, as a giver of good tidings and a warner: but most of them turn away, so they do not hear. And they say, Our hearts are within coverings i.e., screened, from that to which you invite us …] 20) The Prophet said, went on, reciting the chapter for him. Utbah heard and listened, reclining against his arms. The Prophet ended at the point where one should prostrate himself, and he did. Then he said, "Abu-Alwald, you have heard What you have heard, and that is it for you." The Companions of the Prophet followed this sound approach of dialogue and debate. After that, the followers and subsequent generations followed the same approach of dialogue and debate.

It is understood that Islam-based principles for fruitful dialogue are knowledge, understanding and legal foundations for settling disputes. Allah has rebuked whose who argue without knowledge. [Verily, you are those who have disputed about that of which you have knowledge, but why do you argue about that of which you have no knowledge? …] 21) It is recommendable to understand well of the opponent. Often, the debate would linger on with differences persisting between the two sides and the subjects becoming extremely intricate without reaching any conclusion. The reason for this is that each side was unable to understand the basis of the others. Understanding is the corner stone of debate; misunderstanding, by contrast, may compel the interlocutor to accept what is wrong, reject what is right or misinterpret things. Imam Al-Subuki says, "I have often seen people listen but misunderstand what they hear. Consequently, they would alter the aim intended by the book or the author and mislead their colleagues and their followers into conclusions the author has never meant." 22)

For a dialogue to be methodical and productive, Islam recommend certain authoritative and generally accepted principles according to the Qur’an and the Sunnah, as evidenced by the following verse, [And in whatsoever you differ, the decision thereof is with Allah] 23)

20) Surat Fusilat 41:1-5
21) Surat Al Imran 3:66
23) Surat Ash-Shura 42:10
IV. Conclusion

This paper have two aims. Firstly, to highlight the differences of cultures and religions between the West and East so that every human being should avoid imposing each own views, and concepts on other cultures, recognize each own religion while respecting cultural diversity in the world.

Secondly, Today more than any time in the past, the world’s cultures and religions are called upon to sustain joint efforts directed towards furthering dialogue and strengthening coexistence in such a way that may benefit one another; while casting away the causes of discord and disdain, on the basis of the universal values and principles of mercy, love, brotherhood, mutual respect. It is these universal virtues and principles, which all religions share, that should be sublimated and instilled in the minds and behaviours, as a common heritage of humanity, through a true dialogue among cultures and religions.

Dialogue is the ideal way for reaching to the peace and harmony in the East and West. When we stop and consider the reality of the world today, the need for dialogue is more urgent than ever before. With the media revolution transforming the world into a global village where people can no longer live separately or hide their differences, it is vital that the East and West keep the door of communication open, because without it, the World may never see real mercy of Buddhist culture, real love of Christian culture, and real brotherhood of Islamic culture.

[Key words: cultural diversity, religious diversity, dialogue, recognizing other’s religion, respecting the religious cultural diversity.]
References

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이슬람에서 문화의 양성과 대화

최 영 길
명 지 대

본 논문은 문화의 다양성, 그 중에서도 종교문화의 다양성에 대한 이해와 인식 그리고 종교간의 대화가 절실히 요구되고 있는 오늘날 이슬람교는 종교문화의 다양성과 타 종교에 대한 인정 그리고 타종교와의 대화를 어떻게 조명하고 있는가를 제시하고 있다.

이슬람교는 주한 49장 13절 및 30장 22절에 근거하여 종교문화의 다양성을 인정하고 타종교문화에 대한 이해를 촉구하고 있다. 2장 256절에 근거해서는 종교의 강요를 금지하고 있으며, 10장 2-6절 근거해서는 타종교를 인정하고 종교문화의 다양성을 제시하고 있으며, 16장 125절에 근거해서는 타종교와의 대화를 촉구하고 있다.