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DIALOGUE AND DIFFERENCE: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

In Western thought, The recurrence of the idea that the different languages existing in the world are obvious signs of confusion, if not misunderstanding, has its roots in Western Biblical tradition. That is why readers of such thought come across now and again a discussion or simply an allusion to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel usually taken as a symbol of discordance not only of different cultures but of sub-cultures within the same culture as well. It is generally believed that the descendents of Noah who wanted to build a tower to reach heaven were prevented by God who made them speak different languages. Thus the project was aborted. For instance, this is how Dwight Bolinger (1980) opens his chapter, which is significantly entitled "Appointment in Babylon".

In the story of Genesis, after the great flood the nations of mankind settled in the plain of Shinar and began to build a tower, 'to make themselves a name, lest they be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth'. But the tower was to reach to heaven, and the Almighty, with His omnipotence in doubt, came down to inspect the works. He was not deceived in what was giving these Lilliputians the power to challenge Him. 'Behold', He said, presumably to Himself, 'the people is one and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.' So, to curb their enterprise, He confounded their language. (38)

For the Hebrews the Tower of Babel was a symbol of the origin of the world's various languages. In Western metaphysics, It is clearly a symbol of the setbacks resulting from the existence of various languages in the world. Then, here is another example of William Smith in *A New Voyage to Guinea*, written in the eighteenth century, disproving of the captives' speaking the same language for fear that they should overpower the crew: "'But the safest Way,' he wrote, 'is to trade with the different Nations, on either Side of the River, and having some of every Sort on board, there will be no more likelihood of their succeeding than of finishing the Tower of Babel'" (quoted in Bolinger: 46). Communication cannot be easy in this sense, and fear of unity

in language and culture is a Western trait. Enormous Western efforts should, therefore, be made to overcome the age-old story of what Bolinger calls "Babylonian separation" and the confusion of tongues, and enormous human efforts should also be made to overcome the crisis of communication that is originally, one could argue, Western.

On the other hand, Islamic culture calls for communication. More than that communication in Islam is basic to a healthy dialogue. The existence of the various languages has never been a hinderance to communication with others, nor has it ever been an obstacle to beautiful preaching, cooperation, peaceful co-existence, and acquaintance with the different other.

22. And among His Signs
Is the creation of the heavens
And the earth, and the variations
In your languages
And your colours: verily
In that are Signs
For those who know. (Ar-Rûm: 22)

In spite of the fact that all human beings have the same origin, a single pair of parents, they differ in many ways such as the colours of their skins and the variations of their languages. These are all Clear Signs of the Existence of Allah, Signs that should encourage us to know each other and spread peace on earth:

13. O mankind! We created
You from a single (pair)
Of a male and a female,
And made you into
Nations and tribes, that
Ye may know each other
(Not that ye may despise
(Each other). Verily
The most honoured of you
In the sight of Allah
Is (he who is) the most
Righteous of you.
And Allah has full knowledge
And is well acquainted
(With all things). (Al-Hujurât: 13)

Difference, then, does not mean in the least strife and war between human beings; difference is a quality rather than a defect. Therefore, no one or no nation has the right to despise or dominate the other. The most honoured are those who are righteous--those who do not cause mischief on earth and aspire, instead, after human security and welfare in the name of Allah, the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful.

The prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, stresses the same idea when he said: "O mankind! Your Lord is One, your father is one; therefore no Arab is better than a foreigner, and no foreigner is better than the Arab; no black is better than a red, and no red is better than a black save in righteousness" (my translation). This is the basic precept of Islamic culture whose great sources are The Holy Qur-ān and the Sūnna. Hence, Muslim countries have all the necessary requirements for a sane dialogue. In addition to this, they have the most beautiful method inspired from The Holy Qur-ān:

34. Nor can Goodness and Evil
Be equal. Repel (Evil)
With what is better:
Then will he between whom
And thee was hatred
Become as it were
Thy friend and intimate! (Fussilat: 34)

Mohamed Hussein Fadl Allah (1987: 53) is right to stress here the fact that Evil is equated in this Aya with violence and Good with the peaceful style. Difference should on no account incite hatred and violence. Then, another example of the peaceful style of communication is shown as follows:

125. Invite (all) to the Way
Of thy Lord with wisdom
And beautiful preaching;
And argue with them
In ways that are best
And most gracious:
For thy Lord knoweth best,
Who have strayed from His Path,
And who receive guidance. (An-Nahl: 125)

"Where are the Teachers with such qualifications?", asks Abdullah Yusuf Ali in his reading of the Aya, and in his opinion

We must do it with wisdom and discretion, meeting people on their own ground and convincing them with illustrations from their own knowledge and experience, which may be very narrow, or very wide. Our preaching must be, not dogmatic, not self-regarding, not offensive, but gentle, considerate, and such as would attract their attention. Our manner and our arguments should not be acrimonious, but modelled on the most courteous and the most gracious example. (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, fn 2161: 770)¹

¹ I have relied entirely on Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur-ān.

That is the spirit of Islam. A gentle and considerate dialogue is surely more effective than an acrimonious reaction. Allah knows best what is in people's minds and hearts; and it is wrong to believe that violence can change individuals. It merely invokes in them much hatred and obstinacy.

CRISIS OF COMMUNICATION

Isn't it surprising that in spite of the enormous technological advances, to the extent that people are thinking of the world nowadays as a small village, there still is a crisis of communication between cultures? It is definitely the case that the absence of "decent purposes" (Armand Mattelart, et al., 1998: 153) behind the uses of communication technology is a major cause of much human strife and anxiety. In the past, Western religious thought could have shaped the appropriate models of communication had it been properly exploited; as James W. Carey has also put it (1992: 31), "religious thought not only described communication; it also presented a model for the appropriate uses of language, the permissible forms of human contact, the ends communication should serve, the motives it should manifest". However, the sermon, the instruction and the admonition, which were suitable models for imparting information, were not given much importance in comparison with the prayer, the chant, and the ceremony. "The highest manifestation of communication," argues Carey (1992: 18-19) was seen "not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action". Then, it happened that Western religious thought started to give way to the construction of a society based on power and profit. Communication technology thus knew a rapid development regardless of humane motives. The sense of the community was replaced by individualism and much importance was given to new technological inventions in such a way that, ironically enough, instead of thinking of a traditional Western world in terms of "everyman a priest with his own Bible, becomes in the new rendition the priesthood of all computers, everyman a prophet with his own machine to keep him in control." (James W. Carey, 1992: 117). What sort of individual is this that Western society has produced? A human being isolated from other people and controlled by his own machine!

How should the objectives of communication be defined nowadays? When Albert Camus remarked that "dialogue and personal relations have been replaced by propaganda or polemic" (quoted in Carey: 83) he felt the impending danger of a model of communication lacking in human sharing, interaction, and mutual participation. Propaganda denies human dignity by relying on exaggeration and sometimes false arguments; its aim is basically political, and it veils an intention of dominating and abrogating the other. In

this sense, definitions of communication have to be re-considered to make them fit in with the moral aspects of human life. One such definition, for instance, is one suggested by Carey:

Our basic orientation to communication remains grounded, at the deepest roots of our thinking, in the idea of transmission: communication is a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people. (Carey: 15).

Any transmission of information that relies for its distribution on technology regardless of man's freedom of choice cannot be the right model, in moral terms, for dialogue. Messages should be transmitted in space and time for the control of distance and the sharing of ideas between people. That is the sort of communication that John Dewey, the famous philosopher, describes as "the most wonderful" since "it is the basis of human fellowship" that "tie men together and make associated life possible. Society is possible because of the binding forces of shared information circulating in an organic system" (Carey: 22). It is hoped that such a conception should be extended to include not only one single society but all human societies:

There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common ... are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge--a common understanding--likemindedness as sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces ... consensus demands communication. (quoted in Carey: 22)

Although it is difficult to have absolute understanding and consensus between all cultures, it is possible to establish a culture of dialogue that may realise in the long run shared beliefs, shared aspirations, and shared knowledge. Communication in all its aspects and models remains, therefore, necessary today, but its success is contingent upon a dialogue of cultures and not on a clash.

One reason behind such a clash is the wrong Western conception of Islam. This conception is either intended or based on historical ignorance and wrong reports. Albert Hourani believes that attitudes towards Islam could be discerned by the beginning of the nineteenth century:

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europeans who thought about Islam could take up two kinds of attitude towards it (of course, with many variations in both of them). They could see Islam as the enemy and rival of Christianity, using some Christian truths for its own purposes, or else as one of the forms which human reason and feeling have taken in their attempt to know and define the nature of God and the universe. Common to both these attitudes was acceptance of the fact that Muhammad and his followers had played an important part in the history of the world. (Albert Hourani, 1992: 16)

It must be stressed here that Hourani does not qualify the two attitudes, and implies instead that Europeans were right: Islam has never been an enemy to Christianity, but Europeans want to consider it as such using what they think are Christian truths. In fact, the gist of the matter is that Christian societies fear what calls for unity and human fellowship, and the complex of the Babylonian separation is here obvious. Besides, reason is an important characteristic of Islam that is not merely meant to define the nature of God: Allah the Most Merciful encourages human beings to use reason to understand the nature of the universe and to understand the Truth behind its creation; that is why Islam was, and still is, an important part of world history. After all, only what is true prevails.

At times it is not difficult even for lay readers to spot clear enmity towards Islam from some Western writers. Such writers very often make readers believe that they have ample knowledge of Islam and that their analyses are results of deep concern and not enmity. Yet, their writing reeks with false conceptions and illogical reasoning. Kenneth Cragg, in this sense, is a case in point. In *The Call of the Minaret*, he states in the Preface that "this book is one man's effort after an interpretative study of what the muezzin says, an effort inspired by the obligations belonging to Christian conviction--obligations, that is, of awareness, witness, and concern" (Cragg, 1956: viii). Nevertheless, the book does not show any obligations of objectivity that might trigger the beginning of a constructive dialogue from a Christian who decides to adopt the position of an outsider. The same remark applies to his book *The Event of the Qur-ān: Islam in Its Scripture*, where he flatly admits in the introduction that "Muslim possessiveness of the book /i.e. the Qur-ān/ has developed attitudes and skills which have in part obscured and impeded its fullest relevance" (Cragg, 1971: 20). Surely, the various studies carried out by Muslim scholars show no possessiveness whatsoever and helps instead to understand the fullest relevance of the Holy Qur-ān; these scholars, in addition to their wide knowledge in Islamic studies, respect their subjects and have a great sense of responsibility because of their religious duty strengthened by the beautiful teachings of the Holy Qur-ān. Can we then rely on the interpretation of an outsider who makes no claim to objectivity to give us the fullest relevance of the Holy Qur-ān? Another example of enmity towards Islam can be detected in the work of Alfred Guillaume, namely in his book *Islam*. Alfred Guillaume is the sort of Western critic who resorts to certain unbased lies to attack Islam, but a Muslim reader can easily refute them and even laugh at the naivety of the writer. For instance, Guillaume claims that the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, sacrificed a white sheep to the idol Uzza before becoming a prophet (Guillaume, 1956: 8); the naivety of such a claim is obvious when the enmity of the unbelievers towards the prophet is taken into consideration. Why did not they mention that to him in their desperate search for anything to defeat him and belie his mission? Besides, Guillaume

thinks that miracles are not real and have no positive effect on the credibility of the messenger:

They are not history, but are stories invented to glorify the memory of men who are revered as God's messengers to men. They are not of the essence of religion. A prophet's personality should be able to stand on its own merits. If it can, it needs no portent; if it cannot, a portent merely compromises the credibility of the whole narrative by importing the incredible. (22-23)

Guillaume is as unable to grasp the nature of miracles as the unbelievers who are discussed in chapter three. But it is not possible for a scholar to ignore the fact that prophets are Messengers of Allah and that miracles are part and parcel of their missions to convince people of the existence of Allah, the One and Only God. This is to say that scholars like Guillaume and Cragg sacrifice objectivity for the sake of an incredibly false research, which may have negative effects on their readers who absorb their ideas without critical thinking. It is therefore important in this sense to call for dialogue and rely on evidence for statements that lack credibility and kindle hatred for a glorious religion that has the power, and history already testified to that, to build very strong civilizations thanks to the Holy Qur-ān and the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

It is also very surprising that in spite of technological advances in communication, there still is misunderstanding between the West and Islam. The idea of the small village implies the spatial closeness of cultures and hence their co-operation and consensus; there is an urgent need nowadays for dialogue more than for anything else. In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington's interpretation of world cultures in terms of war and enmity verges on an ideological, if not primitive, call for culture suicide.

In the post-Cold War world flags count and so do other symbols of cultural identity, including crosses, crescents, and even head coverings, because culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people. People are discovering new but often old identities and marching under new but often old flags which lead to wars with new but often old enemies. (Huntington, 1998: 20)

If it is true that cultural identity is what counts more, there is no reason why difference should not be accepted. If Huntington has based his conclusion on what is really happening in the world, there is no reason to believe that enmity and wars are natural consequences of religious conflicts and that the survival of religions necessitates the existence of enemies: "For peoples seeking identity and reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential, and the potentially most dangerous enmities occur across the fault lines between the world's major civilizations" which, according to Huntington, are mostly defined in terms of the world's great religions (Huntington: 20). Then, when he mentions Islamic culture, he states that "Islam is the only civilization which has put the

survival of the West in doubt" (210). Huntington's statement undoubtedly shows his ignorance of Islam.

After reading Edward W. Said's *Covering Islam*, it is not difficult to understand that Huntington's discourse together with Cragg's and Guillaume's are simply links in a long chain of Western hatred of Islam, an insistence on the Babylonian separation, a systematic imperial culture which Edward Said calls elsewhere, "a structure of attitude and reference".² However, just as there are Western scholars who falsify the truth and encourage war and enmity, there are those who seek it in its correct form. One of these scholars is Edward Said. In *Covering Islam*, he has critically discussed the Western negative attitude towards Islam:

Yet there is a consensus on "Islam" as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism. In all camps, however, there is agreement that even though little enough is known about the Islamic world there is not much to be approved of there. (Said: xv)

It is indeed ironical that such reactions against Islam should be accepted among Western societies even though little enough is known about the Islamic world let alone Islam itself. Such reactions, Edward Said also believes, go back to a very long time in Western history, and they are encouraged by the government, the academy and the media. "The academic experts," Edward Said remarks, "whose speciality is Islam have generally treated the religion and its various cultures within an invented or culturally determined ideological framework filled with passion, defensive prejudice, sometimes even revulsion; because of this framework, *understanding* of Islam has been a very difficult thing to achieve" (Said: 6-7). It follows then that Muslims are quite often referred to as terrorists and bloodthirsty people, and the alleged objectivity of such experts is never questioned. Therefore, Islam remains far from Western understanding, and the media in this case play their roles by hiding the truth through false interpretation, usually wrong prejudices, and unreasonable fears. For the Americans, for instance, Islam can only have two possible general meanings: "Islam represents a resurgent atavism, which suggests not only the threat of a return to the Middle Ages but the destruction of what is regularly referred to as the democratic order in the Western world" (Said: 51). The violent events, whose dire consequences are said to be the responsibility of some Muslims, unhappily foster Western fears though they logically have no right to make hasty generalizations implicating even Islam itself.

This is what Paul Findley, another Western scholar who seeks truth in its correct form, also laments in his book, *Silent No More: Confronting America's*

² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) xxiii.

False Images of Islam. At school, he was himself the victim of wrong prejudices that teachers taught him about Islam; yet when he discovered Islam by himself, he admitted that his “eyes would be opened to a culture based on honor, dignity and value of every human being, as well as tolerance and the quest for learning – standards that /he/ learnt later are deeply engrained in the Islamic religion” (Paul Findley, 2001: 3). Throughout his book, where he corrects many misconceptions of Islam, Findley stresses the fact that if Islamic religion were well explained and made known to the people who ignore it or have mistaken stereotypes about it, all the world would convert to Islam. Therefore, It is high time Western intellectuals stopped relying on prejudices and studied Islamic texts and culture, as Paul Findley has done, from a perspective that will allow them to understand correctly Islam so that truth can at last reveal itself to many Western societies. Also, it is high time that Muslim intellectuals paid closer attention to Western prejudices so as to correct them and clarify causes of misunderstandings between cultures. One such perspective that is nowadays possible and made easy through communication technology can only be achieved through a mutual exploration of Islam that transcends prejudices and acrimonious reactions. This cannot be realized without a call for dialogue.

A CALL FOR DIALOGUE

So that this call for dialogue would not fall within what Edward Said calls “an apologetic form” aiming to defend “Islam’s humanism, its contribution to civilization, development, and moral righteousness” (Said: 51) – though any objective scholar very well knows that these are part and parcel of Islam and they are not simply invented as a reaction against Western negative attitudes – it is very important to set first agreed upon conditions of a successful dialogue that denies fixed positions, single meanings and the failure to listen. Islamic culture abounds, in point of fact, in conditions for constructive dialogues inspired basically from the Holy Qur-ān and the Sunna. Since it is not possible to cite them all, one example of such conditions can be enough. Professor Abbas Al Jirari, a famous Moroccan writer, has put in his important book, translated into English as *Dialogue from the Islamic Point of View* (2000: 11-13) ten necessary conditions to any successful dialogue. It is important to append each condition with some remarks, when it is necessary, to enlarge the scope of discussion and make the conditions clearer.³

³ I have tried to use my own words in writing the conditions cited by Professor Al-Jirari, having relied on the French version of the book; the appended remarks are put between brackets, and page reference is based on the English version.

1. The necessity to have two or more parties, so that it would not be a simple monologue. [Indeed, the root of the term 'dialogue' confirms the necessity; without at least two parties, there will be no dialogue: 'dia' in Greek means 'across' and 'legein' 'to gather, say, *logos* speech, word, reason; in Arabic, the term for dialogue is 'Hiwār' whose root is 'hāra, yahūr, hawran', meaning to return (Al-Jirari, 2000: 29)].
2. Mutual acknowledgement between the two parties concerned. It starts with a psychological predisposition to confide in the other, with tolerance, that is, to accept him or her as he/she is. [It is important to have such a psychological predisposition to bridge the gap that is either widened by ignorance, misunderstanding, or pride].
3. This acknowledgement must be followed by an egalitarian appreciation, a common will, a reciprocal consideration, and a need of the two sides for interaction. [With the psychological predisposition follow willingness to interact and the readiness to respect the other party in spite of the existence of difficult obstacles].
4. The necessity of openmindedness to avoid passivity and isolation and to avoid anything that leads to the underestimation of the other, to egoism and ignorance. Any tendency towards supremacy, dominance, and tyranny should be rejected. [These are in fact blocking factors that put a wall between cultures and give vent to prejudices and stereotypes about the others].
5. As a pre-requisite, to agree on a minimum of concepts and values. [This is one way to overcome lack of seriousness and acrimonious remarks].
6. To resort to sensible knowledge and be in a position to exchange it in a spirit of serenity and balance. To seek to convince without attacking the interlocutors, nor their reaction, nor their point of view, and without pretending to exclude their specificities. [Mutual respect of the cultures involved in dialogue is necessary since attacking the interlocutors may incite them to insult the sacred beliefs in the culture, see condition 8].
7. To work on establishing dialogue in the given limits and perspectives that do not harbour the provocation of spirit and sentiments. This done, one should avoid offending values and convictions, and whatever implies a hostility against being in its material and spiritual dimensions.
8. To be animated by the will to dissipate disagreements, to eliminate disparities, to surmount factors of contradiction, to narrow gaps and consolidate common links.
9. To make prevalent a feeling of equality between the parties concerned, in a way that no party would feel diminished or incapable to follow and accompany the process of dialogue in all its stages, starting from the interactive exchange till completion and emulation.

10. This assumes a definition of the finality of dialogue, the determination to establish it in sincerity, confidence, moderation, and equity. This implies as well its planning by specifying its conditions, objectives, and the parties concerned.

THE QUR-ĀNIC DIALOGUE

The Qur-ānic dialogue contains all the above-mentioned conditions. More than that, it is a very important reference for any party willing to learn the true nature of dialogue since, as Mohamed Hussein Fadl Allah has put it, The Holy Qur-ān is a book of dialogue. Hussein Fadl Allah (see his Introduction to the fourth edition) states that the question of dialogue is important in the Islamic logic because of the following reasons: First, it leads to the Truth that modern people have completely neglected due to the great number of preoccupations that they find themselves in, or to the great number of philosophical theories, that are mostly doubting the existence of a Creator basing their argument on false reasoning which, in fact, cannot go beyond the material world. The metaphysical, it is important to note here, is rejected by philosophers because of their failure to reach any conclusion about it. This is not to say that the metaphysical does not exist; reason is incapable, when wrongly used, to achieve fruitful results. Hence the importance of dialogue, which, once carried out properly, leads to the Ultimate Truth: Allah is the Only Creator of the universe. Second, dialogue is important in the Islamic logic because it is the best way through which individuals express intellectual, political, and social issues in their personal manners. This offers them a large space of freedom to debate matters relating to the individual and society in this world. Many problems arise and difference is natural, but the Islamic logic, inspired by The Holy Qur-ān, offers people safety and decries oppression, which kills what is most precious in man: Reason. However, this does not mean, Hussein Fadl Allah asserts, that Islamic societies have not the right to protect their ignorant people who are used by sly thinkers to reject their religion. If such thinkers are really looking for truth, they should then dialogue with Moslem thinkers in scientific clubs, open public spaces, through the media, or in conferences to save the people in Islamic societies from doubt and to strengthen their belief in Islam.

In conclusion, it is important for readers of Western conceptions of Islam to know that this religion is not a religion of the sword and terror, as it is wrongly believed. But it is a religion of dialogue that promotes peace and the welfare of man on earth; it is a religion that brings up individuals on the principles of co-existence and mutual respect. It teaches them the positive use of reason and the importance of evidence in the process of any dialogue.