

The Rules of a Fruitful Dialogue

According to the Quran

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Man by nature is a dialogical being. Being endowed with a Divine logos able to know and to enquire about the nature of things, he can enter into a meaningful discourse with his fellow human beings. That is why we see dialogues among scholars, philosophers, cultures, religions and so on, not to mention the humble and unpretentious dialogues, carried out by common people in their routine daily life.

Of course the philosopher who is considered to be the prototype of dialogical thinking and perhaps more than any other thinker we know has applied it in his philosophical discourse is Socrates who whether in the agora, in the law court, in the banquet or in the forlorn outskirts of Athens when meeting a comrade or incarcerated in a jail in the last moments of his life about to drink hemlock, he is engaged in dialogue with friends and disciples. Plato, no doubt has immortalized Socrates by making him the leading partner in almost all of his dialogues.

But we should not nevertheless think that Socrates or for that matter, Plato was the innovator of the dialogue as a philosophical method to attain the truth. We can also discern it in the great sages of the past, such as Buddha, Confucius Lao-Tzu and other great sages of China and India who are virtually engaged in dialogues with their disciples or by their speeches or deeds communicate dialogically with them. One can

also witness it in great scriptures and in the practices of the founders of the great religions. As an instance we try to analyze the principles and the rules of a fruitful dialogue as enunciated in the Holy Quran. Quran as is well-known is the sacred scriptures of Muslims and is considered by them to be the verbatim Word of God.

But before embarking upon our discussion it is essential to point out certain features of Islam which are congenial and conducive to an effective and productive dialogue.

First, Islam is by no means an exclusivist and monopolizing religion. The second article of the Islamic creed enunciates the universality of the phenomenon of the Divine religions. God has created human beings but it is not enough to create them and then to leave them with their own resources but also it is necessary that He should guide humans to their ultimate perfection. In order to realize this end He has sent thousands of messengers, prophets and sages to illuminate their path with the light of knowledge and wisdom and to save them from the tenebrous vale of error and ignorance. In various verses of the Quran it is stated that the Quran confirms the validity of all the previous revelations. Moreover Quran is described as the protector (Muhaymin) over the previous revelations. God has not decreed that there should be only one religious community. For each community He has appointed a Law and a Way. So members of different communities should vie with each other and try to surpass each other in doing virtuous deeds "For each among you we have appointed a Law and a Way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community but (He willed otherwise), that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie

with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ." (Qur. 5:48).

Moreover, God has sent no messenger except in the language of his people such that He might make clear to them His message (Qur. 14:4). He sent His messengers to each community in succession, one after another (Qur. 23:44) so that mankind might have no argument against God after sending the messengers. (Qur. 4:166) "Indeed we have sent messengers before thee and among them are those whom we have recounted unto thee, and among them are those whom we have not recounted unto thee. And it was not for a messenger to bring a sign save by God's Leave." (Qur. 40. 78; also 4:164). This verse signifies that there are many messengers (and consequently religions) not mentioned in the Quran and in addition being the Divine Envoys, they were all the bearers of the Divine Message. Again numerous are the verses in which it is explicitly or implicitly mentioned that belief in all Divine Scriptures and faith in all Divine messengers is incumbent on all believers. "The Messenger believes in what was sent down to him from His Lord as do the believers. Each believes in God, His angels, His Books and His messengers. "We make no distinction between any of His messengers". And they say, "We hear and obey. Thy forgiveness, our Lord! And unto Thee is the journey's end." (Qur. 2:286). In my humble opinion, the above, and many other similar verses in the Quran enunciate some preconditions which facilitate a fruitful and constructive intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

Three Different Methods

For Making a Dialogue

According to the Holy Quran there is no unique and single method for holding and engaging in a dialogue with others. There are different kinds of people who use different ways and employ multifarious materials in their dialogues. But this by no way means that all the means and methods are logically acceptable. The Holy Quran commends three ways for holding a constructive and effective dialogue. "Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner. Surely thy Lord is He Who knows best those who stray from His way, and He knows best the rightly guided." (Qur. 16:126)

So the three acceptable ways for engaging in a dialogue are: 1- The way of wisdom (al-hikmah) referred to frequently in the Quran, according to which it is the greatest good ever bestowed on the humans. "Whosoever is granted wisdom has been granted abundant good" (Qur. 2:269). In addition the Quran, frequently alludes to the fact that wisdom is the core and kernel of all the Divine Scriptures without an exception (Qur. 3:81; 2:129; 2:151; 2:269; 4:54; 31:12; 4:113). Generally the mention of each scripture is followed by the mention of wisdom.

Now wisdom has been defined by philosophers as the knowledge of the nature of things as they are in themselves according to the human capacity. Again it has been said by some philosophers that wisdom consists in assimilating oneself as much as possible to the Divinity, a definition which is no doubt based on the theomorphic nature of man. It has also been interpreted to call people to religion with firm and

truthful words, avoiding obscure language, or by means of conclusive proofs that bring intellectual certitude.

The second method to be used in a dialogue, according to the above-mentioned verse is the goodly exhortation (al_mau`izah al-hasanah) which might also be rendered as beautiful or excellent exhortation. It is meant to persuade people to accept the truth with arguments, proofs and reminders approved by reason and found in the scripture. It also means exhortation that is done sincerely and purely for the benefit of the one who is exhorted.

The third method to use in a dialogue is disputation in the most virtuous or in the best possible manner (bi`llati hiya ahsan). The stipulation "in the most virtuous way" or "in the best manner possible" is essential from the Quranic vantage point, because disputation and wangling is forbidden in Islam as it is reported by authorities from the holy Prophet. The above verse should be construed to mean that disputations, even good ones are not allowed except when they are considered to be the best and are conducted in the best possible or in the most virtuous manner.

The above Quranic verse reminds us of the five possible ways of argument mentioned by Aristotle i.e. demonstration, rhetoric, dialectics, poetics and Sophistics. The first three items in Aristotle`s classification roughly correspond to the three mentioned Quranic methods. Sophistical arguments, no doubt are not accepted neither by sages nor by religions, due to the fact that they are based on premeditated and intentional falsehood. But what about poetry. In a chapter named after the poets (al-Sh`uara) we read the following regarding them: "And as for the poets, the errant

follow them. Hast thou not considered that they wander in every valley. And that they say what they do not do. Except those who believe and perform righteous deeds and remember God and help one another after having been wronged" (Qur. 26: 224-26). This should be construed to mean that poetry is acceptable if and only if it is congruous with the strictures of sapiential wisdom and in that case it can be used as an illustration in the last mentioned three methods.

According to some Muslim interpreters of Aristotle, the above five kinds of argument (demonstrative, rhetorical, dialectical, poetic and sophistical) are addressed to five human character-types or five psychological temperaments. Only very few people can stick to rigorous philosophical demonstrations. Consequently they should be addressed and persuaded by the other acceptable procedures.

From what we have so far said it might be adduced that the rules of dialogue mentioned in the Quran are confined only to interreligious dialogues. This is very far from being the case. In addition to the above mentioned rules, which *mutandis* apply to non-religious dialogues as well, there are other rules which apply to every type of dialogical discourse whether they happen to be religious or not.

In many verses of the Quran, not only believers, but specifically all human beings are addressed which would no doubt comprise all the species of humans, male or female, living or yet to be born, believer or non-believer. In one verse, for example we read: "O mankind! Reverence your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate, and from the two has spread abroad a multitude of men and women" (Qur. 4:1). Commentators have alluded to the fact as to how from singularity

(a single soul) to duality (its mate) to multiplicity (a Multitude of men and women) all human beings have proceeded. Naturally they take *the single soul* to refer to Adam and *its mate* to Eve. Even some Sufi metaphysicians have taken the single soul to refer to the Universal Intellect and *its mate* to the Universal Soul, from whose conjugal union infinite couples including male and female humans have originated. This verse also might be construed to signify that all human beings are equal and have no priority over one another because they descend from one single parents and as standing on an equal par can enter into a meaningful dialogue with each other. Still in another verse reference is made to the fact that human beings have been created male and female, and have been made into different nations, tribes so that they may come to know each other. "O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female and we made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. Surely the most noble of you before God are the most reverent (or the most pious) of you". (Qur. 49:13) "That people have been divided into diverse *Peoples* and *tribes* that they may come to know one another, indicates the manner in which differences in tribe, race, ethnicity, language, nationality and religion can be sources through which human beings gain a deeper appreciation for the reality of the human condition." (The Study Quran, editor-in-chief Seyyed Hossein Nasr, P. 1262). In other words contrary to what is popularly believed differences of race, color, nationality and religion are not impediments, but are helpful and salutary aids for mutual understanding and also for a fruitful and advantageous dialogue among them.

Conditions for an Ideal Interreligious Dialogue

Some Muslim sages have likened the different religions as the radii of a single circle which converge towards the centre but diverge towards the circumference. The greater the distance from the centre, the greater the divergence and the distance of the radii. Therefore it is all important to see where one stands in the circle and in which direction one is oriented. Being oriented to the centre means to be oriented to the root, to the principle or to primordial unity. Taking the opposite direction towards the circumference means being oriented to multiplicity, diversity and dispersion. Sages no doubt view all religions from the vantage point of unity or rather they trace back all multiplicity of religions to their primordial unity as issuing forth from a Divine and Heavenly principle. But most of the multitude are immersed in the outward and marginal aspects of religions and see nothing in them but sheer multiplicity and difference. The Holy Quran, undoubtedly looks at the divine religions from the first or the sapiential point of view, that is from the vantage point of their unity in the Divine Principle, whence it calls all religions to a mutual dialogue. The ultimate end of all religions is liberation or salvation which can be attained by the realization of a very few principles common in all religions "Truly those who believe and those who are Jews, and the Christians and the Sabeans- whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve." (Qur. 2:62; the same theme is repeated in 5:67 with the displacement of Christians and the Sabeans). There have been different interpretations of the "Sabeans" by commentators, some of which are at odds with the

tenor of the revealed verse. The verse refers to those who believe (Muslims), Jews Christians and Sabeans that is all the followers of other religions who like the former believe in God, the Last Day, when all the actions will be retributed and moreover are the doers of good and righteous deeds. Outwardly religions differ enormously in innumerable minute details but viewed from the perspective of their primordial principles they converge to the same essential points.

Still in another verse, the Quran calls forth all the people of the Book, or the adherents of religions, to a word which is common among all of them. It demands them, as partners of a dialogue, to stand on an equal basis and not to Lord it over one another:" O people of the book! Come to a word common between us and you, That we shall worship none but God, shall not associate aught with Him and shall not take one another as Lords apart from God." (Qur. 3:64). But in any case if the people of the Book try to dispute with Muslims, the Muslims are not permitted to dispute with them except in the most virtuous or in the best possible manner. (Qur. 29:46)

Elsewhere the Holy Quran calls the believers, the adherents of all creeds and the humankind in general to come together in agreement about some most essential and indispensable points. "Say: come! I will recite that which your Lord has forbidden you: That you ascribe nothing as partner unto Him and that you be virtuous toward parents and that you slay not your children for fear of poverty- we will provide for you and for them- and approach not indecencies whether outward or inward and slay not the soul that God has made inviolable, save by right. This He has enjoined upon you, that haply you may understand. And approach not the orphan`s property save in

the best manner, till he reaches maturity. And observe fully the measure and the balance with justice. We task no soul beyond its capacity. And when you speak, be just even if it be [against] a kinsman, and fulfil the pact of God. This He has enjoined upon you, that haply you may remember." (Qur. 152-153)

Rules to be followed in a Dialogue

Dialogue, no doubt, in a religious and sapiential context is not merely a garrulous, long-winded cozy chat. As we said earlier, Divine illumination, liberation, self-cultivation and in most religions ultimate solvation is the final end in view. It should reveal to humans, even if piecemeal, some horizons of knowledge and so should deliver them from the darkness of ignorance. In order to achieve this end, the Holy Quran posits certain rules that believers should follow in their daily lives. They should also be followed, no doubt, in dialogues if they are to lead to the desired end. These are rules which are valid nearly in all religions, which if followed will surely lead to fraternal love, filial piety, salvific knowledge and quintessential virtue.

In a Dialogue we Should

Lend our Ears to What is Said

In a fruitful dialogue it is essential for the parties or the partners to listen well to what is said. One should not make haste to give an uncogitated answer before listening fully and grasping adequately what the partner says. The Holy Quran reprimands those who have no ear to listen to what is said: "And be not like those who

say, We hear though they hear not;" (Qur. 8:21)

The Holy Quran is said to be reminder to those who have a heart or give ear to what is said and are witness to truth (Qur. 50:37). Again it gives good news to those who lend ears to what is said and then choose what is the best "So give glad tidings to my servants who listen to what is said, then follow what is the best. It is they whom God has guided. It is they who are the possessors of wisdom." (Qur. 39:17-18)

Always be Just

There are certain rules which should be followed by believers in their daily lives. They should not only be grasped conceptually but should be realized in their own selves as living and lived virtues. Hence they should be meticulously observed as spiritual realities in the course of a dialogue. One of them no doubt is the virtue of justice. According to some ancient sages justice is the pinnacle of all virtues and is the ripe fruit of wisdom. So it should be carefully held in view in a dialogue which is essentially aimed at truth: "And if you judge between men, do so with justice." (Qur. 5:58). One should observe justice, even against oneself or one's parents or kinsfolk and one should not follow caprice and personal desire, which would deter one from the path of justice (Qur. 4:135). One, again, should not let the hatred for a people lead one to be unjust toward them. "Be just that is nearer to piety." (Qur. 5:8) That is why God commands the Prophet that if he judges among people, he should do so with justice (Qur. 5:42) and generally He commands all believers to be just. "Say! My Lord has commanded justice!" (Qur. 7:29). So in a religious and sapiential context one

should always have this golden rule in view.

Always Avoid Conjecture

If one is to attain to truth and certain and inviolable knowledge, one should avoid mere unjustified opinion and irrational conjecture. Mere conjecture is the way of those who have no knowledge "But they have no knowledge thereof. They do naught but conjecture." (Qur. 45:24) Conjecture, according to the Quran is of no avail against the truth (Qur. 53:28). To follow mere conjectures is to follow the passions and the desires of the soul (Qur. 53:23). So believers are enjoined to eschew conjecture as much as possible: "O you who believe! Shun much conjecture. Indeed some conjecture is a sin." (Qur. 49:12)

Follow Truth Wherever

it is Found

There is no truth without reality as there is no reality without truth. It is as if truth is the subjective and reality is the objective aspects of the same thing. One of the Beautiful Names of God often mentioned in the Holy Quran is al-Haqq, which is usually rendered in English as *The Real* or *the Truth*. This means that everything true or real should be traced back to its Divine origin. The opposite of truth is falsehood. Both in religions and in all different versions of sapiential wisdom it is not allowed to confuse truth with falsehood. "And confound not truth with falsehood, nor knowingly conceal the truth." (Qur. 2:42). There are moreover people who dispute by means of

falsehood in order to refute the truth (Qur. 40:5) But there is nothing beyond truth but error (Qur. 10:32) He has created the heavens and the earth by truth (Qur. 6:73; 10:5; 14:19; 15:85; 16:3; 44:30).

Truth will eventually triumph and falsehood will vanish: "Say truth has come and falsehood is vanished. Truly falsehood is ever vanishing." (Qur. 16:163)

How should one Address

Others in a Dialogue?

The Holy Quran lays stress on the way one should address others in a dialogue. How should be one`s manners in a dialogue for example one`s tone of voice? Generally speaking, the Quran demands from us to speak to people in a goodly way, no matter who they are (Qur. 2:81). In certain verses believers are commanded both to reverence God (or the Heaven) and to speak measured and just words (Qur. 4:9; 33:70). One should even speak lenient words, when addressing one`s adversary or one`s enemy. When, for example Moses went to Pharaoh to guide him to the true path of justice and truth he was enjoined to speak to Pharaoh gently "such that he might remember or have fear" (Qur. 20:44) In any case one should not raise one`s voice openly except one who is wronged (Qur. 4:48). One should be especially obsequious and gentle toward one`s parents. One should speak to them reverently and with noble words (Qur. 17:23) "Thy Lord decrees that you worship none but Him and be virtuous to parents. Whether one or both of them reaches old age, say not to them "Uff!" nor chide them, but speak to them a noble word. Lower unto them the wing of humility

out of mercy and say, "My Lord! Have mercy upon them as they raised me when I was [a] Small [infant]" (Qur. 17:24). The Holy Prophet is reported to have said: "The Contentment of God lies in the contentment of the parents and the Anger of God lies in the anger of parents." Some commentators have added that it makes no difference whether parents are believers or disbelievers, as it is evidenced by the dealings of Abraham with his reportedly infidel parents. As in Confucianism filial piety in general and utmost respect for one`s parents in particular are made the focus of emphasis both in the Sacred Scripture of Islam and in the practice of the Holy Prophet.