

Obstacles to dialogue with the other: An Islamic perspective

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Abstract: This research paper discusses the obstacles to dialogue, defining dialogue and its types while specifying its meaning in this particular study. It identifies the obstacles from the perspective of both parties involved in the dialogue. The importance of this paper lies in its examination of the obstacles from both Western and Muslim viewpoints, determining whether these obstacles are shared by both sides or unique to each. The research concludes with key findings, among which is that most of these obstacles are based on misconceptions or preconceived judgments and are not genuine obstacles. Both parties can overcome these issues.

Keywords: Dialogue, Civilizations, Muslim, Obstacles, West.

1. Introduction

God created people with differences in their colors, languages, thoughts, temperaments, tastes, and capabilities. As mentioned in the Holy Quran: "And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ, except whom your Lord has mercy upon; and for this He created them" [Surah Hud: 118-119].

The intended meaning of "difference" here refers to the divergence of people in their religions, morals, actions, and customs [Al-Razi's Tafsir: 18/61]. Thus, the pursuit of eliminating diversity is an impossible endeavor and a quest for something unattainable. Consequently, communication and coexistence with those who differ is inevitable, though such communication may face obstacles, as we will demonstrate.

2. Definitions

2.1. Definition of Dialogue and Its Types

Dialogue: It is the exchange of speech between differing parties for a specific purpose.

Dialogue can be classified into three types:

The first Type: Dialogue of Invitation (Da'wah): This is the type of dialogue in Islam that takes place between a Muslim and a non-Muslim to introduce them to Islam and address any misconceptions they may have. An example of this is the dialogue of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) with his people and the People of the Book. This type of dialogue is a communal obligation (Fard Kifayah) [Al-Ihkam by Ibn Hazm 1/22], based on the verse: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best way" [Surah Al-Nahl: 125].

Second Type: Dialogue of Unity and Integration: This type aims to reconcile the principles of different religions (such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) by merging them into a single framework and eliminating their differences. This type of dialogue is unanimously deemed impermissible in Islam [Majmoo' Al-Fatawa by Ibn Taymiyyah 28/524].

Third Type: Dialogue of Cooperation: This type occurs between people belonging to different religions and beliefs, focusing on their shared values and highlighting them as a basis for collaboration and mutual support on common issues. This type of dialogue is permissible as long as it does not contradict Islamic principles and serves its objectives. An example of its legitimacy is the Hilf Al-

Mutayyibin (Alliance of the Perfumed), which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) witnessed and said, "I witnessed with my uncles the alliance of the perfumed, and I would not want to break it even for red camels". The alliance was named Hilf Al-Mutayyibin because five Quraysh tribes dipped their hands in perfume when they formed the alliance. The reason behind this alliance was that Quraysh tribes were committing injustices in the sanctuary, and some men called for an alliance to support the oppressed against the oppressor [Fath Al-Bari 4/473]. This type of dialogue is the focus of this paper.

2.2. The Meaning of "The Other:"

By "the other," Muslims refer to the "West," which adheres to Christianity as a religion, materialism, and utilitarianism as a foundation for life, and secularism and democracy as its banner. The West stands in contrast to Islamic culture and sometimes views itself in conflict with Muslims, perceiving Islam as a challenge to its values and civilization.

3. Obstacles from the Western Perspective

Western politicians and intellectuals generally perceive Islam as advocating for the elimination of "the other" and forbidding coexistence with non-Muslims. Therefore, their issue lies with Islam itself, rather than with a particular group of its followers. Several prominent figures have openly expressed this sentiment [Dialogue of Civilizations: 58]. This perspective is reinforced through educational curricula across various levels of Western education, shaping the minds of future generations.

One of the primary topics that Westerners focus on is the concept of jihad in Islam. However, they often fail to properly study and understand it. Jihad in Islamic history can be compared to modern defense ministries in contemporary states. Is the mere existence of a defense ministry enough to accuse a state of terrorism or exclusion, or should the state be judged by its actions?

Furthermore, the criticism of jihad in Islam pales in comparison to the atrocities committed by Western powers. Philosophers like Roger Garaudy and thinkers like Noam Chomsky argue that those who accuse Muslims of terrorism because of jihad tend to overlook their own history, which is filled with horrific events, starting from the Crusades in the Middle East, the Inquisition in Andalusia, and culminating in the two World Wars, which claimed over 80 million lives. [The Grave Diggers, Garaudy: 6-23].

Muslims' rejection of certain Western values is often highlighted as an obstacle to dialogue. The West perceives that Muslims do not accept the values of the free and civilized world, particularly in terms of freedom, democracy, and human rights. They accuse Muslims of denying women their right to human dignity, preventing their equality with men, enforcing the wearing of the hijab, confining them to the home, and depriving them of their right to work. In the eyes of the West, these are universal values adopted by the entire free and civilized world, with the exception of Muslims. This perception prevails in the West, from intellectuals, politicians, and leaders to the general public, and it has been repeatedly expressed in speeches and interviews by several Western leaders. [See: Culture and Contemporary Arab Life: 196]

In response to these claims, it is important to note that some Western intellectuals in the U.S. and Europe have expressed their discontent with this view, considering it a stain on their own culture, and have offered rebuttals. Furthermore, the Quran states: "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion" [Surah Al-Baqarah: 256], "And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best" [Surah Al-Ankabut: 46], and "And We have certainly honored the children of Adam" [Surah Al-Isra: 70]. Islam honors all humans, regardless of their background, due to the dignity inherent in their origin, and it glorifies freedom—but freedom to do good and uphold virtue, not freedom to indulge in vice or moral decay.

Women are honored in Islam, being the sisters of men, and they occupy various roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. Instances of oppression or injustice, when they occur, are wrongful practices that are not exclusive to any society and should be addressed within their proper context. The fact that Islam honors women does not necessarily mean that they should be treated in the same way as they are in the West, as each society has its own unique perspective and philosophy on certain life issues. If all cultures were the same, there would be no need for dialogue in the first place.

Some Westerners believe that Muslims refuse to engage in dialogue with others because they suffer from a sense of inferiority and a belief in widespread conspiracies against them, viewing others as hostile and biased against their interests.

This may be true to some extent, but not because Islam or Islamic values prevent dialogue with the West, but rather due to the West's hostile and biased stance against Muslim interests. Upon closer examination of the obstacles claimed by the West, one can see that they are not genuine and do not present real obstacles to meaningful dialogue. These issues appear to be fabricated for specific purposes, such as immunizing Western societies against being influenced by Islam.

4. Obstacles to Dialogue from the Perspective of Muslims

Many Muslims believe that the West is not interested in engaging in genuine dialogue with them for several reasons, the most significant of which are:

Preconceived Notions and Misconceptions about Islam and Muslims: Many Muslims believe that Westerners hold deep-seated, historically inherited misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, stemming from the hostile and distorted legacy passed down from the Middle Ages. This heritage is filled with hatred and false accusations against Islam, the Quran, and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). For instance, the Orientalist Ernest Renan portrayed Islam in a lecture at the College of France in 1862 as: "Islam is fanaticism, it is contempt for science, it is the destruction of civil society, it is the terrifying naivety of the Semitic mind, it narrows human thought, closes it off from all precise ideas, all refined emotions, and all rational inquiry" [Third Mecca Conference Proceedings 1/212]. This mindset, a product of the Crusades, continues to shape and influence the relationship between the West and Islam [Islam in the Third Millennium, Hoffman: 91].

Prominent Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel admitted to this distortion in her introduction to the book *Islam as an Alternative*, where she noted that Islam has become a stereotypical example of these unjust and distorted interpretations. She compared this to the depictions by 19th-century Western artists, who portrayed Muslims as uncivilized barbarians brandishing swords or as decadent figures indulging in pleasures surrounded by beautiful women. Similarly, today, when the word "Islam" is mentioned, the image that often comes to mind is either a bearded, rigid cleric or a vile, immoral terrorist. Schimmel emphasized that these depictions are based on unjust, wrongful interpretations, which anyone who has studied Islamic civilization or interacted with Muslims can refute [Hoffman, *Islam as an Alternative*: 9-10].

Western Superiority Complex and Racism: Another obstacle Muslims perceive is the arrogance or racism that Westerners exhibit, coupled with their disdain for those outside their cultural sphere. Many Muslims feel that Westerners see themselves as superior to other races, believing themselves to be more intelligent, pure, and civilized, while regarding others as savage and uncivilized, undeserving of compassion or sympathy. This belief is widely held among Muslims, who point to statements made by prominent Western thinkers to support their view.

For example, the French thinker Jules Harmand, who lived until 1910, stated: "It is therefore necessary to accept, as a starting principle, the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the highest race and the highest civilization. While this superiority grants us rights, it also imposes strict obligations. The reason we allow ourselves to conquer the citizens of other countries is our belief in our superiority—not only mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but moral superiority. Our dignity rests on this distinction, which in turn justifies our right to guide the rest of humanity. Physical power is only a means to that end" [Third Mecca Conference Proceedings 1/130].

This sense of superiority, Muslims argue, continues to manifest in Western societies today. Neil MacMaster, Senior Lecturer in European Politics at the University of East Anglia, noted in his 2001 book *Racism in Europe* that racism is still prevalent and active in Europe, often receiving encouragement from governments and official bodies. He explained that racism is primarily directed at Black people, whom Europeans historically considered less intelligent, savage, lazy, and prone to criminality. Moreover, he clarified that, until recently, the term "Black" in the West referred to all non-Europeans, whether African, Asian, or Arab.

Lack of Agreement on Common Ground for Dialogue: A thorough examination of the Western context reveals that their dealings with others are often based on three principles: material power, superiority, and self-interest. It is evident that meaningful dialogue cannot occur under the dominance of such principles. Even if dialogue were to take place, it would likely be unproductive and characterized by impositions made by the powerful upon the weak, who have no choice but to submit and acquiesce.

Effective dialogue must emerge from shared principles agreed upon by rational individuals, dictated by sound reasoning, and responsive to the interests of all humanity, such as:

- Preserving human dignity.
- Achieving equality and justice among all people.
- Establishing the foundations of peace and security between nations and peoples.
- Collaborating for the benefit and welfare of all humanity, as well as all living beings.
- Respecting the privacy of others, including their beliefs and social customs.

These principles are all advocated by Islamic law, supported by the Quran, and affirmed by the Sunnah, both in word and action.

For instance, regarding the principle of affirming human dignity, we read the words of Allah: “And We have certainly honored the children of Adam” (Surah Al-Isra: 70).

In terms of the principle of equality: “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.” (Al-Hujuraat: 13).

Regarding the principle of achieving absolute and comprehensive justice, regardless of a person's gender, color, or belief, Allah says: “Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives” (Al-nahl:90).

In terms of establishing the foundations of peace and security, we read Allah's command: “And if they incline to peace, then incline to it [also] and rely upon Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing” (Al-anfal: 6).

Concerning the principle of cooperating for the common good, Allah says: “And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.” (Al-Maidah: 2).

Finally, regarding the principle of non-interference in the affairs of others and allowing them to make their own choices, we read: “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.” (Al-Baqarah: 256).

5. Common Obstacles Between Both Parties

These can be summarized in the following elements:

5.1. Lack of Willingness for Dialogue by Some Parties

This is due to several reasons, the most important of which are:

- 1) Their inclination towards isolation from dissenters, preferring that each group lives separately from the others.
- 2) Their limited understanding of their own beliefs, despite their conviction in their validity, which leads them to avoid confronting others for fear of being exposed and revealing their ignorance.
- 3) A lack of confidence in the strength and resilience of their beliefs, coupled with a fear of being influenced by the opposing side.
- 4) Envy and arrogance that prevent individuals from engaging in dialogue and from yielding to the truth, regardless of its clarity.
- 5) Some people view dialogue as an opportunity to legitimize falsehood by engaging with its proponents and listening to them on equal terms, believing that refraining from such discussions denies them the chance to present their views.

In truth, falsehood cannot be legitimized when confronted with the truth, no matter how hard its advocates try.

5.2. Lack of Conviction in the Value of Dialogue

Some individuals adopt a negative stance towards dialogue, viewing it as futile and ineffective. They believe that the atmosphere of dialogue tends to breed obstinacy and an unwillingness to accept defeat. This was the case with some non-Muslims among the Arabs towards the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as indicated in the Quran: "And when the son of Mary was presented as an example, your people laughed aloud. And they said, 'Are our gods better, or is he?' They did not present it except for argument. But they were a people transgressing" (Quran 43:57-58). While this observation is accurate, it should not serve as an obstacle to engaging with dissenters. The least that dialogue can achieve is "for us to understand others, and for others to understand us".

6. Conclusion

6.1. In Conclusion, We Can Summarize Several Findings, the Most Important of Which Are

- 1) The required dialogue with the other is one of coexistence, which is a project endorsed by Islam.
- 2) The areas open for dialogue with others are very broad, including collaboration to preserve the shared values between divine messages, environmental conservation, and combating poverty and disease.
- 3) There are no obstacles to dialogue from the Muslim side; the accusations of hatred leveled against them are fabricated claims that lack historical basis.
- 4) Some Western media intentionally distort the image of Muslims, aiming to maintain the animosity of their populations towards Muslims out of fear that they may be influenced by Islam.
- 5) The West builds its policies with others on power, superiority, and self-interest, disregarding the values it claims to uphold, such as freedom, democracy, and human rights, when they conflict with its interests.

Researchers recommend fostering communication with thinkers, media personnel, and researchers in the West, establishing consistent channels for this communication to overcome the obstacles to dialogue faced by both parties.

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