The Purpose of Interreligious Dialogue: Coexistence or Cooperation?

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Today's globalized world has created new demands in intercultural interactions which transforms the traditional perceptions of most of the relationships. Different types of communication (e.g. the media), blurred borderlines, tourism expansion, the Internet, and so on re-define the expanding relationships between cultures. In this process, the world's great religions, which clarify the lives of people in different parts of the world, have reached an awareness towards themselves and others and interreligious dialogue has seriously been set up. The kind of attitude towards interreligious dialogues, which arises from the current globalized conditions, have specific foundations different from those of the traditional attitude. In this paper, the foundations of the unproductive approaches to interreligious dialogue are investigated, the foundations of interreligious dialogue are analyzed, and some approaches and solutions for these intercultural interactions are presented.

In traditional approaches, conflict and interaction of religions were of different natures. The focus of those approaches was on a kind of controversial argument to show the predominance of one religion over others. But, considering the cultural conditions of the current world, interpretations such as "debates between religions" or "debates among the religious" are substituted with the issue of "interreligious dialogue". Interreligious dialogue is based on different

foundations, and includes various approaches which are mentioned and analyzed in the following. Besides, the drawbacks of the problematic approaches are also investigated. Finally, reference is made to the areas in which interreligious dialogue can be useful and effective. In interreligious dialogue, seven different approaches are possible:

1- Interreligious dialogue for converting others:

The first traditional approach towards interreligious dialogue is converting another person, that is, to change the religion of someone who does not follow your religion and lead the dialogue in a way that s/he accepts your religion. Missioners, who regarded themselves as the right, and intended to promote their own religion, mostly followed this approach. Even the presence of many religions that had the chance to appear in other societies, was aimed at converting the people living in other cultures. Not much attention is paid to this approach in the current global world. At present, only the dogmatists, who consider religion as a means to gather forces in order to attack other religions, have such a perception of interreligious dialogue.

2- Interreligious dialogue for charging the other's religion with fault:

The second approach to interreligious dialogue could be that we try to have the opportunity to oppress the other side's religion, demonstrate its weaknesses and shortcomings, usually indirectly. It is attempted to raise weaknesses and ambiguities of the other religion, and the strengths of our own religion in a controversial way, thus opening a way for the acceptance of our religion. This

approach is a follow-up of the previous one. In a society that lives in the globalized world and is governed by the current global conditions, interreligious dialogue does not either apply to these issues.

3- Interreligious dialogue for knowing the cultural conditions of different societies:

There is a third approach, which in contrast to the two previous approaches that were posed by religious people, is introduced by those who live in a secular society. Their viewpoint in the secular society regards religion as an element of culture. There are different elements of culture in a society, such as language, customs, traditions, the way of clothing, the type of housing, to which another element, the religion of the society, could be added. This viewpoint usually works with phenomenological methods and evaluates all religions in a secular analysis. What is examined in this approach is what effects a religion could have in a society and how these effects have been. In these analyses, they do not deal with the good or bad of the religions, rather, for researchers religion is just like a scientific phenomenon to be analyzed. Those who tend towards this approach, intend to consider society as an empirical reality and analyze elements existing in the realities of religions as an object, and then, in the light of such analyses, propose rules for the relationship between religions. Therefore, a person may be an atheist, but at the same time exactly know a religion and try to analyze all aspects of a religion.

In intercultural approach, we deal with two issues: culture and religion. Culture and religion are different categories. Culture is a set of conditions which can

create different forms in different societies, but religion claims something beyond such forms. Religion claims that it deals with issues other than what goes in life, and this is the reason why it proposes a kind of worldview, a kind of ideology, which can create many of the value frameworks of the society. Commitment to religions cannot be included into the tight frame of culture. Despite religion has cultural manifestations, it follows an approach that cannot be neutral. Accordingly, it cannot be dealt with like culture. Therefore, in interreligious dialogue and interreligious interaction, these people do not usually have a serious presence, because they consider all religions as the same, and do not consider the concerns of these religions. So, it is important that in interreligious dialogue, people who believe in religions (the religious), with the background they have about their own religion, gather and engage in a dialogue about their concerns.

4- Interreligious dialogue for knowing the strengths and weaknesses of oneself:

The fourth approach, an auspicious opportunity which is usually neglected, is that in some circumstances, we need to know the other in order to know our selves. We will reach awareness of our selves only when we have reached awareness of the other. A meaning becomes clear to us, only when we have other lights and shades around us.

It is said that someone showed a white paper to another person and said "look at my beautiful drawing". The other person asked "What's this?" and s/he answered "A polar bear is chasing a polar fox in the snow". His or her claim is not conceivable, even if it were true. We understand what a polar bear is, only

when it is contrasted with other light and shades and other colors so that one can understand what has been demonstrated in the drawing. In most cases, people understand what they actually have, when they get to live in another society. For instance, as it is observed, people in our society say that they understand the meaning of most of the advantages of their religion only when they go abroad. In interreligious dialogue, sometimes we intend to know our selves through interaction with the other. As a result, there emerges a valuable opportunity, that is, we can solve most of the ambiguities of our religion and eliminate its impurities. Opportunities through which we become aware of many of the ambiguities of our religion, usually mixed with superstition, and find out what can be effective in refining our religion. While it can be a very good axis for interreligious dialogue, this great benefit is not usually taken into consideration. Only when you create intercultural relations, you will reach such an awareness about yourself.

5- Interreligious dialogue for mutual understanding between religions:

The fifth approach is about mutual understanding between religions. In this approach, we want to understand in the process of our dialogue that what the other religion is and what our religion is. Most of the time, we consider the other religion from our own perspective, so that we add claims to it, which are not basically at the core of its attention. The other religion might have a fundamentally different perspective. Unfortunately, we face with lots of such cases in the relationship between Islam and Christianity. The perception we Muslims have of Christianity and the perception Christians have of us Muslims

are completely different. Islam is a religion based on propositions, on beliefs, and on propositional beliefs, but in Christianity, the beliefs of the Christians are based on history. A true Christian is a person who believes in a flow of God's presence in history. For a Christian, the belief in the Original Sin, in the Fall of Adam, in the Original Sinfulness of man, in Jesus as the Incarnation of God and as the manifestation of God's Love for mankind—who washed away this sin with his miserable life and his crucifixion— in a certain section of time, is one without which his or her Christianity will be meaningless. In a Christian's viewpoint, crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the peak of history, and for this reason the cross sign has a great significance for Christians. This has a big difference with our perception of Jesus Christ as the Messenger of God. Christianity is a religion requiring historical beliefs, but in Islam, only the belief in God's oneness and the Prophet's Divine mission are enough to be considered as a Muslim. Knowing these attitudes of religion could be helpful in our way of thinking about issues and problems. With these different viewpoints, issues such as evolution could be much problematic for Christianity, while it is not so problematic for Muslims. Because the problem of evolution attacks most of the basic beliefs of Christianity, but among Muslims, it is simply a matter of interpretation and explanation of some Qur'anic verses.

Knowing the cultural backgrounds of religions and of the areas in which religion has been proven helps us to distinguish between the main elements of religions and other cultural elements. It is likely that we assign beliefs to religions, which are not related to religions, they are for example related to Iranian Shi'a, or to African Islam, influenced by its African nature.

Therefore, in interreligious dialogue, mutual understanding can be created very well. This is the very aspect of dialogue to which less attention is paid in interreligious dialogue circles.

Interreligious dialogue can also be useful in understanding between cultures. Europeans emphasize that while Europe is secular, they care for Christianity as one of their cultural affiliations. So, if they are confronted with Muslims, they emphasize on their Christianity despite their secular ideas. Christians (Europeans) who do not believe in Christianity and at the same time consider Christianity as an element of culture and identity. Therefore, one can get familiar with the cultural backgrounds of the two attitudes and the interaction between them in interreligious dialogue.

6- Interreligious dialogue for finding the commonalities between religions and for peaceful coexistence:

The sixth approach in interreligious dialogue is to find out the commonalities and discrepancies. This attitude usually regards dialogue as something raw. The two sides of the dialogue accept that there are some commonalities and some conflicts between them and intend to superficially emphasize on the common aspects and finish the dialogue contentedly without getting any results. Unfortunately, most of the interreligious dialogues that have become widespread in our society and are set forth in the comings and goings, are usually spent standing on ceremonies. In such interreligious dialogues, usually one side says that we accept what you say, the other side also says the same; they start to talk about the commonalities, and then show courtesies, and there is no conclusion in the end. Therefore, as it is observed, there has been no

accomplishment in the many comings and goings in the form of formal government invitations in the last several years. This is one of the dilemmas in interreligious dialogue, which is assigned much cost and provides little benefits.

This approach is mainly aimed at peaceful coexistence in order to reduce the areas of conflict between religions and to plan a program for neglecting the discrepancies.

7- Interreligious dialogue for joint practical cooperation in the face of common problems:

The seventh approach that can be very effective and instrumental is planning for cooperation in the contemporary world in the face of human tragedies, taking into account the principled beliefs of the religious. In the current world, many human tragedies threaten humankind, a cure to which can be the interaction between religions. The decline of moral values, loneliness, aimlessness and absurdity of human being who is confined in a technologic life, natural-environmental disasters, oppression and injustice, collapse of family, and not having an identity are all among the consequences of secular life based on mere humanist attitude. Most of these are hidden human tragedies that secular solutions are not able to solve. These are the important needs of humankind, that make many of them interested in living as a believer in order to answer the dilemmas of the contemporary humans. Religions, in their dialogues, can propose their common solutions for preventing these human tragedies through a pragmatic interaction. They can demonstrate much cooperation for the growth of human beings and life giving to him, who are

entangled in the current era. In the author's point of view, this type of interreligious dialogue can be the most fruitful one. Religions should cooperate regardless of their conflicts, interact, gather to plan practical programs, systematically show their important presence to the world, and be actively involved in the globalization era and play their unique role. In the previous approach, religions intend to continue their own path without disturbing others, while in this approach, such a passive encounter is changed to an active one in order for a cooperation aimed at common impact and achievement of human and spiritual growth of the contemporary human beings.

Religions should pay attention that despite all conflicts, their main enemies are aimlessness and absurdity, and the decline of humanity in the world, and that human beings' selfishness and mere pleasure-seeking should be confronted through the expansion of religious values in the societies. Religions should be concerned with the expansion of religious values in human societies so that human beings can achieve the spiritual depth of life rather than the superficial mundane life. In religious values, the spirit of worship is regarded as one of the most important human values. It is believed by religions that mere pleasure-seeking makes humans like animals. Their humanity depends on the growth of their innate tendencies such as perfectionism, spirituality, and God's worship. If human pleasures prevents them from human growth, they must certainly stand against this pleasure-seeking; religions also want the same thing. The religious constraints are in line with the growth of all existential aspects of humans and mere pleasure-seeking obstructs the way towards human growth.

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This is how the Islamic-Christian collaboration and cooperation becomes essential as a great mission. This is nothing more than a rejection of the domination of bestial values and the extension of religious human values.

It seems that this cooperation should fulfil the following values:

1- Promotion of altruism instead of egoism. Some people pay attention to altruism merely due to its social benefits, while religions promote altruism because of its intrinsic value and they are committed to expanding it among people whether it has social benefits or its social benefit cannot be spotted.

2- Growth of moral values instead of mere material and pleasure-seeking values. Religions believe that moral values are important for human excellence, and that material benefits cannot be a good criterion for paying attention to such moral values. As their Divine duty, religions try to create and promote moral values in the society.

3- Expansion of peace and friendship instead of sedition and killing of the oppressed people in order to gain material and pleasurable interests. Religions do not seek to promote peace because of the necessity of creating appropriate atmosphere for people's pleasure seeking, but rather because they believe that the spirit of fierceness in war is equal to the expansion of brutality of human beings. Religious teachings have created the belief that every human being is as valuable as all other human

beings, and nobody has the right to violate another person's rights. Besides, helping fellows is considered as the main duty in piety.

4- Paying attention of human beings to the necessity of their relationship with the creator of people and the world, and the amorous worship of Him. The mission of religions is not to create hollow spiritual pleasures. This is an inherent human need for devotion to God and relationship with Him. Believers consider the whole world as a creature of a Wise and Knowing God, who not only has providence over all the affairs of the world all the time, but also continually guides the autonomous human beings. Certainly, these individuals are different from those who consider the world as having emerged from a chance and a mere mechanistic flow. Dependence of a religious person on God will create a purposeful and vivid life for him or her.

5- Valuing the religious constraints aiming to achieve the real freedom in deliverance from caprice in order for spiritual evolution, instead of bestial freedom, which confines the potency for human excellence.

6- Expanding social justice instead of delight for the pleasures determined by firms. Religions do not pay attention to social justice only for confronting popular rebellions so as not to let the pleasure-seeking lives of some people be put into danger, rather, they consider the right of human beings to enjoy justice as one of their most important religious duties.

7- Respecting the rights of humans as the right that God has assigned to all human beings, not simply because of the requirements of social relations for a mere pleasure-seeking life. Religions emphasize these Divine rights and view them in the light of spiritual and material growth, not in the direction of a mere materialistic life.

8- Fighting against poverty, ignorance, and oppression as a Divine duty.

This is the route which is realized only through Islamic-Christianity cooperation. Although irreligious people and the enemies of religions provide many tools for confronting with this cooperation, one should alertly try to achieve the dominance of common spiritual values, regardless of religious differences, and actively embark on delineating a bright way for humankind.