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Islam and Religious Freedom: Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Promoting Global Peace

*Tayseir M. Mandour**

I. INTRODUCTION

As President Obama said in his historic speech at Cairo University, the United States seeks a “new beginning” with Muslim communities around the world based on the shared principles of justice, progress, tolerance, and the dignity of all human beings.¹ Obama also said, “[I am] firm in my belief that the interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart.”²

This message is maintained in the Qur’an, which was revealed more than fourteen centuries ago. It provides, “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another.”³ The premises of our gatherings should therefore be to foster peace and eliminate the tension and conflicts that dominate many regions of our world.

This Article addresses four main issues: first, the background of the problem; second, the stand of Islam toward religious freedom; third, the essential role of interreligious dialogue in connecting communities of discourse on the international, regional, and national level; and fourth, the Egyptian role in promoting interfaith dialogue on the international, regional, and national level.

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1. President Barack Obama, Remarks by The President on A New Beginning (June 4, 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

2. *Id.*

3. THE NOBLE QUR’AN: INTERPRETATIONS AND MEANINGS OF THE NOBLE QUR’AN IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. 49:13 (Muhammad Muhsin Khan & Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali trans., Dar-us-Salam Publications 1999), *available at* <http://www.dar-us-salam.com/TheNobleQuran/index.html> (last visited Sept. 25, 2010).

II. THE BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

In the shadow of the September 11, 2001 attacks, “interest in interfaith dialogue boomed” as an essential tool for bridging the ideological divide in modern societies, especially those with multiple identities and religious pluralism, deeply shaped by globalization.⁴

The time is now at hand for those who support and understand the importance of a peaceful coexistence between believers of different faiths, and those who recognize such coexistence as being a cornerstone to global peace and justice. They must now take the initiative to support those who are working desperately to prevent fanaticism, conflict, and violence.

But fulfillment of this goal will be accomplished one step at a time, through the behavior of people who belong to different religions and cultures as they speak with and get to know each other, discovering their commonalities while respecting their differences and individual rights to privacy.

This goal will not be achieved by declarations and recommendations only, particularly at the elite level, but primarily through institutional work of the international organizations, the civil societies, and governments. This work must include and reach out to politicians, decision makers, community leaders, and—most importantly—people at the grassroots level.

III. THE STAND OF ISLAM TOWARDS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

This section addresses the question of whether Islam is opposed to the freedom of belief. Islam guarantees freedom of religion. This is verified in the following Qur’anic verse: “There is no compulsion in religion.”⁵ Accordingly, no one is forced to renounce his religion in favor of another faith.

One’s freedom to adhere to the religion of one’s choice establishes the base of his belief, and this is emphasized through the following Qur’anic verse: “whosoever wills, let him believe, and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve.”⁶ This verse demonstrates that Islam accepts that there is more than one religion. The prophet

4. RICHARD M. LANDAU, WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT INTERFAITH DIALOGUE (2001), <http://www.interfaithdialogue.com/outline.html/> (last visited Sept. 2, 2010).

5. THE NOBLE QUR'AN, *supra* note 3, 2:256.

6. *Id.* at 18:29.

stressed this in the first constitution of the Islamic state in Al-Medina when he acknowledged Judaism and declared that the Jews and Muslims in Al-Medina formed one nation.⁷

An example of Islam's granting religious freedom is Omar Ibn Al-Khattab's treatment of the Christians of Jerusalem. Omar Ibn Al-Khattab guaranteed the safety of their lives, their churches, and their crosses, assuring that none of them would be harmed on account of his or her religion.⁸

Islam also grants freedom of thought and opinion, provided that discussions on religion are of an objective nature and are not a pretext for abuse and ridicule. This is stated in the following Qur'anic verse: "Invite [all mankind] to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better."⁹

In light of this tolerance, discussions may take place between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Qur'an invites Muslims to discuss religious matters with the people of the Book in the following Qur'anic verse:

O people of the Scripture: Come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall take others as lords besides Allah. Then, if they turn away, say: "Bear witness that we are Muslims." [bowing to the will of God].¹⁰

This verifies that each person is entitled to adhere to the faith in which he believes, should the discussion between both parties fail to accomplish its aim.

The following Qur'anic verse expressed the same idea with the prophet Mohammed's final remarks to the pagans of Makkah: "To you be your religion, and to me my religion."¹¹

7. A. GUILLAUME, *THE LIFE OF MUHAMMAD: A TRANSLATION OF ISHAQ'S SIRAT RASUL ALLAH 231-33* (2002).

8. G. LeviDellaVida and M. Bonner, 'Umar (I) b. al- Khatt b, in *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ISLAM* (P. Bearman, et al. eds., Brill 2d ed. 2010); *THE COVENANT OF OMAR*, <http://www.mideastweb.org/covenantofomar.htm> (last visited Sept. 2, 2010).

9. *THE NOBLE QUR'AN*, *supra* note 3, at 16:125.

10. *Id.* at 3:64.

11. *Id.* at 109:6.

IV. IMPORTANCE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

We must consider two important questions concerning interreligious dialogue. First, how can interreligious dialogue regain trust between the Islamic world and the West? Second, how can interreligious dialogue connect communities through discourse?

Establishing trust between any two human communities is generally based on several conditions, which may be summed up in the following points.

A. Recognition and Basis of Equality

There must be recognition of the other communities and interaction based on equality.¹² This is a fundamental prerequisite that cannot be overlooked, otherwise recognition and trust would be eliminated and the other communities' existence would be seen as nonexistent. Consequently, there would be no recognition among parties, but rather one dominant party giving orders to be obeyed by the other party, enforcing its will on the other party, and rejecting any opposition to its positions. In this situation, there could be no way to establish trust between the two parties concerned.

B. Mutual Respect

The mere recognition of others outside of one's religious community is not sufficient. Rather, each party should respect the other, along with his religion, faith, beliefs, customs, traditions, civilization and cultural characteristics, and—in general—his human rights. Such mutual respect is the first true basis for any dialogue, understanding, or cooperation between the two parties.

It must be taken into consideration here that mutual respect does not necessarily mean agreeing with others, but it means the willingness of each party to listen to the other and to accept in a constructive way his ideas or criticism.

12. Ketevan Kakitelashvili & Malkhaz Toria, *Identity, Similarity, and Difference as Factors for Intercultural Dialogue*, in ROUND TABLE: CAUCASUS – PERSPECTIVE OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE 45 (Tbilisi State University 2007) available at http://www.culturedialogue.com/unesco/unesco_files/Caucasus - Perspective of Intercultural Dialogue.pdf

C. Dialogue Between the Two Parties

Dialogue between the two parties is the natural outcome of the recognition of others outside one's religious community and of mutual respect and understanding between the two parties. Through dialogue, each party may understand others' positions, circumstances, beliefs, and the characteristics of others' civilization. Moreover, dialogue corrects many preconceived ideas and misunderstandings of each party towards others. Dialogue likewise makes it possible for both parties to identify common ground in their civilizations, cultures, and histories that may be utilized for the interests of both.

D. Tolerance

Dialogue, as mentioned above, is not an end in itself but it is a means to achieve tolerance, which in turn promotes culture exchange, common understanding, and positive and peaceful coexistence, and consolidates the roots of mutual cooperation in all spheres and at all levels.¹³

E. Joint Cooperation

There is no doubt that such a tolerant atmosphere paves the way for establishing trust and promoting cooperation between the two parties. Such an atmosphere could ultimately lead to the expansion of the scope of cooperation not only between those specific two parties, but with others as well, so that all may cooperate in laying down the foundation for peace and stability across the world. Our ultimate goal should be global peace.

V. THE ROLE OF EGYPT IN PROMOTING INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Creating a meaningful and constructive dialogue can help to attain a better coexistence among followers of different religions and cultures. Egypt has earnestly attempted for the last twenty years to

13. See Pieter Coertzen, *Grappling with Religious Differences in South Africa: A Draft for a Charter of Religious Rights*, 2008 BYU L. REV. 779, 792 (2008) (“[A] plurality of directions is . . . a reality that has to be reckoned with. . . . The fact that many of the ideological and religious directions of institutions and associations in society cannot be accepted . . . does not mean that they should not be respected and tolerated.”).

sponsor events designed to foster dialogue.¹⁴ This is mainly for the sake of promoting better understanding and cooperation among peoples and nations in a closely interrelated world, where relations among those nations and individuals depend on accelerated improvements in technology, communication, information flow, and the immense mutual influence of global events. These developments require an attitude of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Egypt believes that intellectuals must play a critical role in establishing this type of meaningful interfaith dialogue.¹⁵ As cooperation and understanding increase among the scholarly, this progress will spread to their nations and peoples.¹⁶ These individuals bear the burden of delivering the message of tolerance by promoting justice and equity. Therefore, pursuing and establishing avenues of communication inevitably becomes the basis for productive dialogue.¹⁷

As communities establish and support these dialogues, mutual understanding among world religions, cultures, and civilizations will increase.¹⁸ Each will gain a greater understanding of the others' core beliefs.¹⁹ Over the last twenty years, Egypt has sought to establish communication between world religions, cultures, and civilizations.²⁰ To promote this kind of dialogue, Egypt has hosted, participated in, and promoted many conferences and events.²¹ These events range from local meetings fostering harmony in Egypt to widespread efforts among the nations of the world.

14. See Egypt State Information Service, *Egypt and Inter-civilization Dialogue* (2001), <http://www2.sis.gov.eg/En/Pub/magazin/summer2001/11021800000000011.htm> (last visited Sept. 2, 2010).

15. See TREVOR NOBLE, *SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL CHANGE* 67 (Palgrave Macmillan 2000).

16. See *id.*

17. DAVID R. SMOCK, *INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND PEACEBUILDING* (David R. Smock ed., US Institute of Peace Press, 2002).

18. See *id.*

19. See *id.*

20. See MOHAMMED ABU-NIMER, AMAL KHOURY, EMILY WELTY, *UNITY IN DIVERSITY: INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN THE MIDDLE EAST* 141–78 (US Institute of Peace Press, 2007).

21. See *id.*

A. Interfaith Dialogue on the International Level

The last dozen years have seen numerous accounts of Egypt engaging in dialogue at the international level. In 1998, Egypt signed an interfaith dialogue agreement between Al-Azhar and the Vatican,²² and entered into a similar agreement in 2002, when Egypt signed an interfaith dialogue agreement between Al-Azhar and the Church of England.²³

Also in 2002, Egypt participated in the World Economic Forum Davos conference, held in New York, discussing “Dialogue Between Civilization.”²⁴ Egypt again participated in the World Economic Forum Davos conference held in Switzerland in 2003, where forum participants discussed interfaith dialogue among monotheistic religions.²⁵

Egypt also participated in the interfaith dialogue events held in conjunction with the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004.²⁶ Egypt took an active role in 2006 and 2007, by hosting the World Economic Forum Davos conference in Sharm El Sheikh.²⁷

In 2008, Egypt participated in a conference with Saudi Arabia, held in Madrid, discussing “Dialogue Among Civilizations.”²⁸ In addition, in 2008, Egypt participated in a conference with Saudi Arabia, held in New York, discussing dialogue among cultures and civilizations.²⁹

22. International Religious Freedom Report: Egypt 2001, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/relegypt01.html> (last visited Sept. 2, 2010).

23. Polly Stewart, *Anglicans, Muslims Agree to Promote Understanding*, BELIEFNET, Jan. 30, 2002, <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2002/02/Anglicans-Muslims-Agree-To-Promote-Understanding.aspx> (last visited Sept. 25, 2010).

24. WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, A PARTNER IN SHAPING HISTORY, THE FIRST FORTY YEARS, (2009), <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/40years.pdf>.

25. *Id.*

26. Eric J. Greenberg, *Olympic Spirit Drives Interfaith Meeting*, THE JEWISH DAILY FORWARD, Aug. 13, 2004, *available at* <http://www.forward.com/articles/5122/>.

27. WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, *supra* note 24.

28. P.K. Abdul Ghafour, *Interfaith Meet Set for Sept. 30*, ARAB NEWS, Sept. 7, 2009, *available at* <http://archive.arabnews.com/?page=1§ion=0&article=126159&d=7&m=9&y=2009&pix=kingdom.jpg&category=Kingdom>.

29. *Id.*

B. Interfaith Dialogue on the Regional Level

Egypt participated in all regional conferences and meetings held in Jordan and other Arab countries, which were organized by The Arab Thought Forum and headed by Prince El Hassan bin Talal.³⁰

In 2007, Egypt participated in an interreligious dialogue conference in Makkah, Saudi Arabia.³¹ This conference later became the model for conferences in Madrid and New York discussing “Dialogue Between Cultures and Civilizations.”³²

C. Interfaith Dialogue on the National Level

Over the last five years, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs has conducted roundtable discussions concerning interfaith dialogue.³³ The most recent conference, held in March, 2009, was centered on peace, justice, and fighting extremism.³⁴

In addition, over the last six years, Egypt has hosted and participated in roundtable discussions with the Middle East Council of Churches, discussing mutual respect, tolerance, and coexistence.³⁵ Several activities and working papers have been produced concerning implementation of a dialogue culture at the grassroots level, with cooperation between government and civil society. An example of this can be found in the Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue Between Cultures, which was established over ten years ago in Alexandria.³⁶

VI. CONCLUSION

In order to attain a global environment of peace and justice, it is necessary for different faith groups to have mutual respect for each other, even if they disagree with each other’s opinions. Islamic

30. See Arab Thought Forum, <http://www.multaqa.org/etemplate.php?id=36> (last visited Sept. 2, 2010).

31. Ghafour, *supra* note 28.

32. See *id.*

33. See Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Arab Republic of Egypt, <http://www.islamic-council.org/> (last visited Sept. 2, 2010).

34. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights: Reports, Publications, and Activities, <http://eipr.org/en/report/2009/12/12/295/303> (last visited Sept. 25, 2010).

35. See Middle East Council of Churches, http://www.mec-churches.org/main_eng.htm (last visited Sept. 2, 2010).

36. See Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures, <http://www.euromedalex.org/networks/egypt> (last visited Sept. 2, 2010).

organizations support this effort, and Egypt has engaged in and encouraged many activities to improve respect and dialogue between faith groups. Egypt, as well as other countries of the world, must continue these efforts.

