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Promoting Interreligious Understanding Through the Holy Quran

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Qur'anic term of *Ahsan al-Qawl* as a basic linguistic concept of language role in interreligious communication in order to identify the meanings of (inter)religious communication based on the Qur'an and to construct the appropriate model in analysing interreligious discourse. The connection of the term with language use and language practice in interreligious communication will be discussed. The findings show that the principles of interreligious communication are mostly based on the God-man relation, and also the man-man-nature relation. These relations clearly distinguish the meanings of religious communication in the Islamic perspective from the Western perspective.

Keywords: Interreligious communication; religious language; religious discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Ishii (2008) proposes the urgent task of planning and implementing interreligious communication study as a new challenging paradigm due to the critical interreligious conflicts and battles across the world. In Malaysian context, the conflicts for example, are over the use of the word 'Allah' as well as the use of the Malay Bible. These two are considered as interreligious conflicts which need to be viewed by using interreligious communication framework.

With this view in mind, therefore, this paper intends to discuss the Qur'anic term of *Ahsan al-Qawl* as a basic linguistic concept of language role in interreligious communication in order to identify the meanings of (inter)religious communication based on the Qur'an, and to construct the appropriate model in analysing

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interreligious discourse.

The term *Ahsan al-Qawl* is cited from: Who is better in speech than one who calls (men) to Allah, works righteousness, and says, I am of those who bow in Islam? (*Surah Fussilat*: 41:33). The connection of the term with language use and language practice in interreligious communication will be discussed based on an Islamic philosophy of language and an Islamic philosophy of religious perspectives.

2. Language and interreligious communication

"No people or tribe is without religion, however variously it finds expression and even if it has not been specifically identified by name" (Sundermeier 1999, p. 856). This means that religious experience, belief and expression are woven into the very fabric of human nature and life. It is true that religion is found everywhere, nevertheless, it has proven impossible to formulate a definition of religion that is universally acceptable for religion is an extremely sensitive and sentimental issue. Any movement or group that masked their religious actions (whether in a positive or the opposite manner), in the name of faith and religion, apparently tend to be very influential and gain huge support from the people. In the new millennium, globalization and growth of technology have enabled people to travel and migrate without much problem. In fact, people nowadays are often said to have been extensively "globalized" by the Westcentric ideology of science and technology and lost their traditional religion-consciousness. Therefore, many countries in the world have citizens who embrace different types of religion. Religious diversity in a country, thus, should not be seen as an encumbrance, but as an asset. Such diversity calls for tolerance, which according to Wilmot (1997) is viewed as willingness and readiness to accept the differences and acknowledge rights of others to be different.

Ishii (2008) points out that interreligious conflict and interethnic conflict that have been happening at present may be attributed to the natural epitomes of such postcolonial and postmodern ideological movements. A more extensive study points to the fact that these conflicts and battles are "based on long-standing and deep-rooted religious-ethical traditions and identities" (Ishii, 2008, p. 135). Surprisingly, "today", however, Bakar (1997) asserts that "far from being buried in the dustbin of history, religion is making a comeback. Contemporary religious revival is not restricted to any one religion. It has become a universal phenomenon" (p. 3). The revival in embracing and understanding religion has seen the increase number of scholars conducting studies in intercultural communication from interreligious perspectives (e.g., Chen 2001; Chen & Starosta, 2005; Chuang, 2004; Ishii, Klopf, & Cooke, 2003). Tu (2002), who takes a stance from a nonethnocentric, interreligious, and intercivilizational point of view cautions that:

> Unless we truly believe that we can and must learn from faiths of other peoples, "dialogue" can easily degenerate into a strategy for conversion. The plurality of faith, as a defining characteristic of spirituality in the 21st century, demands that all ethico-religious traditions enter into the dialogue among civilizations for mutual learning (p. 87).

Acceptance of diversity and difference does not rule out the possibility of necessary interreligious and intra-religious criticism. O'Grady and Scherle (2007), rightly state that any apposite theology of religion or interreligious relations needs to include not only reflections by a religion "on the observation of other religions from the outside" but also "theological reflection" by a religion upon itself (O'Grady & Scherle, 2007, p. 8). The underlying assumption of interreligious dialogue is that despite differences and disparities between religions, there is basic human commonality which makes it possible for people to communicate with one another and to discover how we can learn to understand and embrace each other's religion. However, it is a fact that neither the challenge nor how such dialogue is to be worked out will be the same for everyone. Diversification should be matched with understanding and communication which requires pressing articulation, locally and globally.

3. The meanings of (inter)religious communication in the Qur'an

In Islam, the Qur'an is the main source of knowledge. This Holy Book covers various concept of knowledge, either generally or specifically. Behind the Qur'an, there is *hadith* which becomes the second source in Islam in

explaining the general concepts and meanings of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, the concept of communication is basically a manifestation of Allah's creation. He says:

> *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).*
>
> (*Surah al-Hujurāt* 49: 13)

It is clear from the verse that differences in gender and ethnic are two signs of Allah's creation. On one hand, in terms of the purpose of communication, the differences are to be used to create an effective communication among them by knowing each other. On the other hand, how to communicate within different gender and ethnic is not mentioned specifically in this verse, but it can be understood from another verses. For example, being gentle with people, passing over their faults and asking for forgiveness for them are mentioned to be practised in the communication. Allah says:

> *It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them Wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (Their faults), and ask for ((Allah)'s) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast Taken a decision put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him)*
>
> (*Surah Ali-'Imrān* 3: 159)

In order to broaden the differences into interreligious communication, there is no obstacle in bridging the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. As Islam is a religion that promotes peace, equality and justice, interreligious communication is a part of Muslims' duties and responsibilities in their societies.

In Malaysia for example, Muslims have to accept non-Muslims as Malaysian citizens as well as their neighbours, friends and partners. In line with this, as Malaysia is a theocracy country in which believe in God is the first principle of Rukun Negara (National Principles), all Malaysians from different religion play an important role in establishing an effective communication among them.

In doing so, where Islam as a federal and official religion is concerned, Muslims have to lead the others in practising this effective interreligious communication. Allah says that Muslims are the best example for the others in showing their good attitude including interreligious communication:

> *Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah. If only the People of the Book had faith, it were best for them: among them are some who have faith, but most of them are perverted transgressors*
>
> (*Surah Ali-'Imrān* 3: 110)

Basically, in Malaysia, there is a very close relation between religion and ethnic. Malaysians may know others' religion by knowing their ethnic. Malays are normally associated with Islam, Indians with Hinduism, and Chinese with Buddhism or Christian. Each ethnic has their religious event. When Malaysians from different religion start to know each other, they normally do not ask question about their religion. They may ask about where they live or their job or discuss current issues. During religious event, especially in urban area, they greet their friends from different religion without touching on any sensitive religious issues.

4. Model of analysing interreligious discourse

One of the basic needs in analysing interreligious discourse is model of analysis. The question now is, 'What is the appropriate model in the analysis?' This paper suggests the Qur'anic term of *Ahsan al-Qawl* as a basic linguistic

concept of language role in interreligious communication. *Aḥsan al-Qawl* means the best speech. It is cited from surah Fussilat, verse 33:

> Who is better in speech than one who calls (men) to Allah, works righteousness, and says, "I am of those who bow in Islam"?
>
> (*Surah Fussilat* 41: 33)

According to al-Sabuniy (1979), there are three components of the best speech in this verse; calling people to Allah, doing righteousness, and being proud as Muslim. Based on these components, Munif (2008) proposes four elements in producing a model of religious discourse:

- Tauhidic practise (calling people to Allah)
- Righteous works I or text features (doing righteousness)
- Righteous works II or discourse practise (doing righteousness)
- Religious hold or social practise (being proud as Muslim)

In order to link the model with the role of language, it is functionally clear in the model that language is used as a tool to:

- call people to believe in God,
- do righteous works with other people by using effective words;
- do righteous works with other people by practising good representation,
- practice the right teachings of religion.

On the other hand, language is a tool to reach the ultimate goals of communication which are: to worship Allah and to help another in righteousness and piety. Allah mentions these goals in two different verses:

> *I have only created Jinns and men, that they may serve Me.*
>
> (*Surah al-Zāriyāt* 51: 56)

> *...Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancor: fear Allah: for Allah is strict in punishment.*
>
> (*Surah al-Mā'idah* 5: 2)

In interreligious communication, language is a tool to promote peace, justice, knowledge, wisdom and equality. For example, in creating an interreligious understanding through a dialogue, language is a tool for personal success. The participants in this kind of communication use word to get the message across clearly and convincingly in order to request a raise, or to negotiate a deal, or to share knowledge within the context of different religions toward one similar understanding. All these are righteousness works as Allah mentions:

> *But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on thee, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world: but do thou good, as Allah has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for Allah loves not those who do mischief."*
>
> (*Surah al-Qasas* 28: 77)

Al-Qaradawi (2004) suggests the use of an effective language in interreligious communication by referring to the Qur'an. Allah orders Muslims to use good arguments and most gracious when dealing with non-Muslims:

> *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.*
>
> (*Surah al-Nahl* 16: 125)

Al-Qaradawi (2004, p. 41) also suggests that the content of the interreligious communication must be focused on the similarities, not on the differences. With similarities, a sort of agreements can be achieved and benefitted from the communication. As well as the content of the interreligious communication is to reach the truth, therefore, there is no dominance of one side over another.

However, in Malaysia, it has been over a decade since the use of the word 'Allah' and the use of the Malay Bible have been politicised by some politicians to create interreligious conflict. In order to implement the model of *Aḥsan al-Qawl* in this conflict, the main challenge is the accurate understanding over religious role. Al-Qaradawi's (2004) suggestion is in line with what Ishii's (2006), who insists that religion plays deeply influential roles in the building of the most fundamental and latent parts of culture, such as attitudes, beliefs, cognition, values, and worldviews.

5. Conclusion

The findings show that the principles of interreligious communication in the Qur'an are mostly based on the vertical relation (God-man), and also the horizontal relation (man-man-nature). These two types of relations clearly distinguish the meanings of religious communication in the Islamic perspective from the Western perspective. The findings also propose a linguistic framework in constructing a religious communication analysis model.

This paper concludes that the impact of the Qur'an in religious communication must be studied continuously and comprehensively. In addition, such communication should be implemented in the study of a specific communication course, such as interreligious communication studies, particularly at tertiary education. It can be implemented in Malaysia by introducing a new course or by adding a topic of interreligious communication in a few currently core university's courses such as Islamic and Asian Civilizations (TITAS) and Ethnic Relation (Hubungan Etnik).

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