Interfaith Dialogue: An Islamic Framework

M. Elius*

Abstract

This study analyses the concept of interfaith dialogue, a widely popular issue, from an Islamic perspective with a view to mitigating religious misunderstanding and promoting interfaith harmony. The study adopts qualitative content analysis based on historical elucidations of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. For this purpose, historical documents including both classical and contemporary Islamic literature have been analysed along with recent scholarly journal articles, theses, dissertations, as well as reliable online contents. The findings reveal that Islam accepts interfaith dialogue as a necessary condition for promoting peaceful coexistence and interfaith harmony in every society. The Qur'an has laid a great emphasis on maintaining unity in diversity. The Prophet (PBUH) was a model for mitigating interfaith conflicts throughout his life. Though a few Qur'anic verses seem incongruous with interfaith dialogue and harmony, upon investigation, they are attested to be applied to specific circumstances only. Finally, it concludes that Islam, being a universal religion, plays a unique role in mitigating interfaith encounters and encouraging peaceful coexistence among the followers of different religions and cultures of the world.

Key words: Interfaith dialogue, peaceful coexistence, Islam, Qur'an, sunnah.

Introduction

Religions, in general, teach love, tolerance, and sympathy for one another irrespective of their differences in beliefs and rituals. But nowadays, people belonging to different religions are divided into conflicts, hatred, and enmity.[1] Many tragic events have stigmatised human history on the grounds of religion.[2] In this situation, it is necessary for people of all faiths to get together to mitigate interreligious tensions. Interfaith dialogue is considered an effective instrument for mitigating interfaith tensions and promoting mutual understanding and harmony among religions.[3] As Leonard Swidler, one of the leading scholars of interfaith dialogue, terms interfaith dialogue as the heart of the dialogue of any kind, which he

---

* Professor, Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000

[1] K. N. Islam, "World Peace Through Interreligious Dialogue", *Religions for Peace,* (Dhaka: Academic Publishing House Ltd., 2022), pp. 11-22.

[2] Human Right Watch, 2016, Retrieved: 15 July 2020, from: www.hrw.org.

[3] M. Elius *et. al.*, "Islam as a religion of tolerance and dialogue". *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 18, No. 52, 2019, pp. 96-109.

regards as one of the most comprehensive human disciplines. He also mentions that the world has constantly felt the need for dialogue, but subsequently the 'Fall of the Wall' in 1989, and later 9/11, compelled people of the world to realise its need further.[4] Emphasising the necessity of interfaith dialogue, Hans Kung, a renowned scholar of interfaith dialogue, is said to have mentioned: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions."[5] Thus, dialogue among religions is necessary for establishing peace in the world.

Islam, a religion of peace, emphasises the essential unity of mankind for the common benefit of all. It regards humanity as one family, the *ummah*,[6] and puts emphasis on universal brotherhood.[7] Islam teaches that God has created all human beings irrespective of race, colour, class or territory, and they belong to the family of God. That is why, it prohibits all kinds of intervention related to other faiths, and enquires to preserve beliefs and practices of all despite their commitment to a religion different from its own.[8] Islam holds that every individual depends on each other and thus, inspires societal integration for maintaining and promoting stability, peace and understanding. The holy Qurʾan contains numerous convictions on maintaining peaceful relationships among various communities.[9] Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life provides ample instances of dialogue with the adherents of different faiths. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also maintained genuine and equitable socio-economic relations with them.[10] He used to visit and aid the sick and distressed regardless of

---

[4]   L. Swidler, 'The History of Inter-Religious Dialogue'. Catherine Cornille (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. 2013), pp. 3-19. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118529911

[5]   L. E. Provencher, "A Critical Analysis of the Islamic Discourse of Interfaith Dialogue", MA Thesis, The University of Arizona, 2010, p. 24.

[6]   Mohammad Elius, "Understanding Religious Diversity, Tolerance and Peace-buildings: An Islamic Approach", F. Huda, M. J. Alam, S. Farid, T. D. Rozario and A. Sayem (eds.), *World Religions and Culture: Interfaith Education in Bangladesh,* (University of Dhaka, 2022), pp. 51-74.

[7]   N. S. H. Khair, M. Ahmad, M. K. N. Z. Nazri, M. R. M. Nor, K. M. K. Hambali, "Integration of Multicultural Society: Islamic Perspective", Retrieved 20 January 2020, from: http://www. ipedr.com/vol42/024-ICKCS2012-K10014.

[8]   M. R. M. Nor, I. Khan, M. Elius, "Analysing the Conceptual Framework of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Relationship in Islam", *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies.* 8(2), 2018, pp. 309-334.

[9]   Al-Qurʾan, Surah al-Nisa, 4:1; Al-Hujraat, 49:13; Al-Imran, 3:64; Al-Maeda, 5: 48; Al-Nahl, 16: 125.

[10]   M. Z. Haq, "Muslim's Participation in Interfaith Dialogue: Challenges and Opportunity". *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* Vol. 49, 2014, pp. 613-646.

their religious affiliations.[11] His rule in Madinah is a pertinent example of a harmonious relationship among various religious and ethnic communities. History provides examples that people of other religions received favourable treatment in various Muslim territories and their religions were safeguarded as well.[12] Nowadays, people have misunderstood Islam as they lack proper Islamic knowledge as well as are influenced by ongoing propaganda against Muslims and Islam. On the given circumstance, this research is expected to help reduce misunderstanding about Islam, and thus, contribute to mitigating interfaith tensions around the world.The purpose of this research is to provide an Islamic framework of interfaith dialogue through analysing the Qur'anic teachings and the Prophetic approaches toward the people of other religions with special reference to the concept of diversity, tolerance, freedom of religion, justice and equality with a view to mitigate misunderstanding about Islam and promote interfaith harmony in the world.

Definition and Purpose of Interfaith Dialogue

The term 'dialogue' originates from the Greek word 'dialogos' which means 'through words'.[13] Thus, dialogue is a kind of communication that occurs through words.[14] According to Collins English Dictionary, "dialogue is a communication or discussion between people or groups of people".[15] Accordingly, dialogue is, by and large, a discussion, discourse and conversation between two or more groups or individuals so as to share and learn from one another.[16] In the words of Leonard Swidler, dialogue is a conversation on a common issue with differing opinions.[17] It is to be mentioned that there are differences between dialogue and debate. Debate aims to defeat the other whereas dialogue aims to understand the view of others.[18]

---

[11] M. I. I. Tirmidhi, *Sunan-al-Tirmidhi*, Vol. 3, (Egypt: Sharika Maktaba Wa Matbah Mustafa Albani Al-Hobla, 1975), p. 328

[12] I. Khan, M. Elius, M.R. M. Nor, M. Y. Z M. Yusoff, K. Noordin, and F. Mansor, "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam", *SAGE Open*. October-December 2020, pp. 1–10.

[13] B. David, "Difficult Dialogues" (Clark University), Retrieved 17 June 2017 from https://www2. clarku.edu/difficultdialogues/learn/index.cfm.

[14] M. Elius et al., "Islam as a religion of tolerance and dialogue", Op. cit. pp. 96-109.

[15] Collins English Dictionary, Accessed 10 January, 2022 from https://www.collinsdictionary. com/dictionary/english

[16] K. M. Karim and S. A. Saili, "Inter-faith dialogue: The Qurʾanic and Prophetic perspective, *Journal of Usuluddin,* Vol. 29, 2009, pp. 65-94.

[17] L. Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue", in *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institution*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 47-52.

[18] F. Haque, "Countering Religious Militancy through Interfaith Cooperation: An Islamic Perspective", Accessed 28 January 2023 from http://www.ihmsaw.org/resourcefiles/ 1288447470.

Therefore, dialogue stresses on good communication to promote mutual understanding and mitigate ignorance.[19] Similarly, Gerard Forde is said to have elucidated that dialogue seeks to increase worthy relations among people.[20] Hambali *et al.* (2013) assert that dialogue is a unique way to integrate man's social life; it provides an opportunity to improve their relationships and avoid stereotypes.[21]

Interfaith dialogue, as we understand it, means all constructive and positive relations with individuals and societies of other religions with the aim of mutual enrichment and understanding.[22] Moreover, mutual imitation is not the way of interfaith dialogue. It is just a mutual understanding between the people of various religions. It asks to be strict to one's own faith and considers others worthy of respect as individuals.[23] Muhammad Shafic and Mohammed Abu-Nimer stress that agreement and uniformity are not the goals of interfaith dialogue; rather, it is a collaboration of different religions for the common welfare.[24] Bishop Patrick D' Rozario comments that interfaith dialogue is not to prove one religion true and another untrue by comparing these two religions and also not to make one new religion combining the teachings of all other religions; rather, it is to increase co-operation in terms of communication and understanding between them.[25] While explaining the purpose of interfaith dialogue Raimundo Panikara mentioned:

> The aim of interreligious dialogue is understanding. It is not to win over the other or to come to a total agreement or a universal religion. The ideal is communication in order to bridge the gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstanding between the different cultures of the world, letting them speak and speak out of their own insights in their own languages.[26]

According to Leonard Swidler, the purpose of joining interfaith dialogue with those of other religions is to make our world a better place for dwelling.[27] Similarly,

---

[19] R. Panikara, *The Interreligious Dialogue*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 10.
[20] B. Popovska, Z. Ristoska, and P. Payet, "The Role of Interreligious and Interfaith Dialogue in the Post-Secular World", Accessed 31 December 2022 from https://academicus.edu.al.
[21] K. M. K. Hambali, S. Sintang, N. Senin and S. Shahrud-Din, "Interfaith Dialogue in the Context of Comparative Religion", *Middle East Journal of Scientific Research,* Vol. 14 (12), 2013, pp. 1599-1612.
[22] Ibid.
[23] M.A.G. Forde, "What is interreligious dialogue?, *A Journey Together: A Research for Christian Muslim Dialogue*, (Wilton: Cois Tine, 2013). Retrieved: 10 July 2019 from www. Coistine.ie.
[24] M. Shafic and M. Abu-Nimer, *Inter-faith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims,* (London and Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2007), p. 2.
[25] B. P. D' Rozario, "Antaḥdharmiẏa sanlap samparke prathamik dharaṇa" (The Primary Concept about Interfaith Dialogue), *Oikotan*, Vol. 16, 2004, pp. 6-15.
[26] R. Pankara quoted in K. N. Islam, *World Peace through Interreligious Dialogue*, *Op. cit.,* pp. 11-22.
[27] Leonard Swidler, "The History of Inter-Religious Dialogue", *Op. cit.,* pp. 3-19.

Provencher argues that interfaith dialogue brings communities into a common understanding of harmony and respect.[28] For Vivekananda, the purpose of interfaith dialogue is to make us better humans and not to convert to a new faith.[29] Thus, the prime cause of interfaith dialogue is to promote unity in diversity to establish harmony and peaceful coexistence in the world. It is to be mentioned that interfaith dialogue is not limited to organizational activities. It is one kind of shared relationship or interaction which takes place among individuals and communities on various levels. Nowadays, most cities or countries are occupied with people belonging to different religions like Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus etc. Every kind of positive relationship between these groups of people can be connected to interfaith dialogue. This positive relationship includes relations between neighbors, classmates, colleagues, friends etc. Thus, dialogue may take place in every situation, and when it occurs between religious groups or individuals, it is termed as interfaith or interreligious dialogue.

Islamic Framework of Interfaith Dialogue

Various terms have been used to denote dialogue in Islam i.e., '*mukalmah,', Jadal' 'mujadalah 'mufawaḍah', 'muhajjah' 'ḥiwar,' and 'ḥadith'*.[30] The word *ḥiwar* has been stated three times with the meaning of dialogue in the Qurʾan,[31] and it is considered as the most suitable word for dialogue. The Qur'anic word *ḥiwar* entails a form of dialogue involving two or more groups or persons aiming to correct errors, provide opinions, create facts, and respond to wrong interpretations.[32] Miriam Sabirah Ashki holds that the word *ḥiwar* signifies an exchange of ideas and thoughts approaching a mutual understanding or awareness, which is closer to the meaning of present-day dialogue.[33]Another word closer to *hiwar* is *jadal* which means a conversation to a convincing debate through arguments found in the discussion among theological scholars.[34]Islam inspires all kinds of discussion for promoting good in society, and that is why it asks Muslims to help each other in goodness and not in sin and transgression.[35]

---

[28]   L. E. Provencher, "A Critical Analysis of the Islamic Discourse of Interfaith Dialogue", M. A. thesis, The University of Arizona, 2010, p. 18

[29]   Leonard Swidler, "The History of Inter-Religious Dialogue", *Op. cit.,* pp. 3-19.

[30]   M. Zia-uI-Haq, "Muslims' participation in interfaith dialogue: challenges and opportunity", *Op. cit.,* pp. 613-646.

[31]   Al-Qurʾan, 18: 34; 18: 37; 58:1

[32]   S. B.Humaid, "Islam and dialogue with the other", *Interfaith Dialogue: Cross –Cultural Views*, (Ghainna Publication, 2010), p. 30.

[33]   M. S. Ashki, *Islamic Approaches and Principles of Dialogue*, (Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, 2006), p. 16.

[34]   Ibid. p. 17.

[35]   "And help one another in goodness and piety, and do not help one another in sin and transgression" (Al-Qur'an, 5:2).

Islam holds that God has created the universe and He is the sole authority of it. Everything in the universe is dependent on and related to one another. Human beings, as creations of God, are not exceptions. They are also dependent on each other regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliations. Thus, Islam accepts diversity as a God-given phenomenon,[36] and Islamic worldview is, thus, based on unity in diversity.[37] God does not differentiate in bestowing His mercy upon the universe. In this case, the identity of religion does not carry any special favour.[38] So, Muslims are bound to believe in all the Prophets sent by God and show equal respect to them.[39] Reminding the unity of Prophethood, the Qurʾan clarifies that all Prophets of God professed the first testimony (*shahadah*). In other words, they all proclaimed *Tawhid* or Oneness of God.[40] It also says that the message of all Prophets is fundamentally the same as they came from the same source.[41] Thus, there is no superiority of the Prophets or their messages over each other.

The Qurʾan also reminds Muslims of their same origin and asks them to maintain harmony in differences.[42] Furthermore, the Qur'an emphasises two relationships: the relationship with God (*ʿibadah*) and the relationship with fellow human beings (*muʿamalat*). To improve the relationship with God, it is necessary to improve the relationship with other human beings which can be achieved through interfaith dialogue. There are many Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions which acknowledge the importance of religious diversity, mutual co-operation, and interfaith harmony.[43]

The Qur'anic Principles of Interfaith Dialogue

For a sincere and successful dialogue, courteous dealings either by words or deeds are crucial. The Qurʾanic injunction for Muslims is to adopt the highest courteous attitude to others.[44] Therefore, the Qurʾan asks Muslims to speak logically with

---

[36] Al-Qur'an, 10:99; 11:118.

[37] Mohammad Elius, Diversity, tolerance and peacebuilding…, *Op. cit.,* pp. 51-74.

[38] Al-Quran: 17:20

[39] Al-Qur'an 2: 285; 22: 67

[40] Al-Qurʾan 21: 25

[41] Al-Qurʾan 41:43.

[42] M. Elius, I. Khan and M.R. M. Nor., "Interreligious Dialogue: An Islamic Approach". *KATHA,* Centre for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya. Vol. 15, 2019b, pp. 1-19.

[43] M. R. M. Nor *et al.,* "Analysing the Conceptual Framework of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Relationship in Islam", *Op. cit.,* pp. 309-334; I. Khan *et al.,* "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam", *Op. cit.,* pp. pp. 1-10; M. Elius *et al.,* "Islam as a religion of tolerance and dialogue", *Op. cit.,* pp. 96-109.

[44] M. Ayoub, "Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qurʾān and contemporary exegetical tradition", Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Islam and Religious Diversity: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies,* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 129-154.

lovely words while conversing with the followers of other faiths, and argue with them, if needed, in maintaining the highest courtesy.[45] As a religion of peace, Islam teaches to avoid potential conflicts in society. Therefore, the Qurʾan forbids Muslims to insult others for their contradictory beliefs.[46] For unity among various faith groups, the Qurʾan reminds us of the same source of origin of mankind and encourages us to know one another. As the Qurʾan states:

> O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that youmay despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Godis (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and iswell acquainted (with all things).[47]

According to the Qur'anic teachings, God created Adam and Ḥawwa (Eve), and made them the source of all mankind in this world. Therefore, all human beings share the same origin regardless of their religions. Muhammad Hashim Kamali maintains that the same origin is the indication of equal status of mankind regardless of their different religious identities.[48] Extending the same view it is argued that the Qurʾanic teachings inspire Muslims to co-exist peacefully with those around them despite their ethnic, religious, and cultural variances, and promote tolerance and respectful behaviour in the case of daily communications.[49] Again, the Qur'anic verse (49:13) guiding us to be acquainted with one another indicates interfaith dialogue.[50]After necessitating interfaith dialogue, the Qurʾan has shown the way for a successful dialogue. To avoid contradictory issues in dialogue the Qurʾan emphasises the common issues of different religions.[51] Hence, the 'common words' between religions will be the basis of interfaith dialogue. So, any kind of contradictory issue between the parties should be avoided. In his seminal work, *Christian Ethics*, Isma'il Raji Al-Faruqi also asserts that dialogue between the people of different religions would be based on ethical guidelines of human life in its place of theological defence on the nature of God.[52] Similarly, Fatmir Shehu argues that the theological issues of

---

[45]   Al-Qurʾan, 16:125.

[46]   Al-Qurʾan, 6:108.

[47]   Al-Qurʾan, 49: 13.

[48]   M. H. Kamali, "Diversity and Pluralism: A Qurʾanic Perspective", *Islam and Civlisational Renewal,* Vol. 1(1), 2013, pp. 27- 54.

[49]   N. Senin, F. Grine, W. A. W. Ramli, K. M. K. Hambali, and S. F. Ramlan, "Understanding the 'other': the case of Al-Biruni (973-1048 AD)", *International Journal of Ethics and Systems*, Vol. 35(1), 2019, pp. 1-19.

[50]   K. M. K. Hambali, N. F. A. Rahman, A. Awang, A. Ghazali, A. N. S. M. Sallam, "Inter-Religious Dialogue Activity: An Experience among Undergraduate Students in Selected Universities in Malaysia", *Akademika,* Vol. 89(1), 2019, pp. 71-82.

[51]   Al- Qurʾan, 3:64.

[52]   I. R. al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas*, (Montreal: Mc Gill University Press, 1967), p. 33.

different religions should not be the basis of interfaith dialogue; rather, it should be based on all aspects of human life. He remarks that the main concern of interfaith dialogue is to solve problems, not to create confusion about their religion; its focus should be to increase mutual awareness which helps decrease conflicts between them.[53] Kamali's view on interfaith dialogue also goes against theological issues of religions as he points out that when the Christian representatives from Najran met the Prophet (PBUH) and started to discuss a theological issue of Christianity which was contradictory to Islam; accordingly, both parties could not reach an agreement on the issue and made a peace treaty on common interest.[54] Thus, anything that contradicts between religions should not be the issue of interfaith dialogue.

Again, justice is a prerequisite for establishing peace, prosperity, and interfaith harmony. Consequently, it is vital for a multi-religious society to maintain unity in diversity. The holy Qur'an highlights justice in every aspect of life.[55]In this connection, al-Tabari points out that Muslims can never be unjust or unfair to anybody irrespective of their religions; they must be fair in their treatment of others.[56] That is why the Qur'an does not support any force in the affairs of religion. Islam does not approve anything that causes violence or killing. As violence is always an obstruction to peace and harmony and causes death and destruction, the Qurʾan altogether prohibits all kinds of violence in the world. The Qur'an affirms: "Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved mankind entirely".[57] There is no ambiguity in this verse: killing an innocent soul whether he/she is a Muslim or non-Muslim is equally punishable, and that is compared with the killing of all humanity. Thus, Islam protects the rights of every individual whether he/she belongs to a religion or not.

Freedom of religion is articulated in many verses of the Qur'an. Though Islam provides complete freedom in the case of religion, it is not free from criticism. For example, Robert Spencer[58] has attacked Islam by criticising that Islam motivates its

---

[53]   F. Shehu, "Inter-Religious Dialogue and Contemporary Peace- Building: From Hostility to Mutual Respect and Better Understanding", *Beder Journal of Humanities* (BJH), Vol. 1, Issue 3, Spring 2014, pp. 59-76

[54]   M. H. Kamali, "Diversity and Pluralism: A Qurʾanic Perspective", *Op. cit.,* pp. 27- 54.

[55]   Al-Qur'an, 05:08.

[56]   M.I.J Al- Ṭabari, *Jamiʿ al-Bayan fi Taʾwil al- Qurʾan*, (Beirut: Muʾassasah al- Risalah, 2000), p. 321.

[57]   Al-Qurʾan, 5: 32.

[58]   Robert Bruce Spencer is an American anti-Muslim author and blogger. In 2003, he founded and has since directed a blog that tracks what he considers Islamic extremism, known as Jihad Watch.

adherents to kill people of other religions if they do not agree to embrace Islam.[59]He has quoted the Qurʾanic verse: "Fight those who do not believe in Allah or the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth".[60]

To understand this verse of the Qur'an, it is necessary to understand the background of its revelation. In fact, the verse was revealed during the battle of *Tabuk* when the Non-Muslim Arabs and the Romans became united to abolish the Muslim community.[61] It was, indeed, a tough situation and a severe threat for Muslims. Given this difficult situation, Allah ordered Muslims to encounter their enemies and save Islam. This was a wartime defensive policy and is not an injunction against non-Muslims.[62] Analysing the commentaries of the Qurʾanic verse (9: 29) Arif Kemil Abdullah opines that it was related to the aggression and hostility of the people of the book, but not their religion.[63] So, there is no scope to fight for converting people to Islam. The basic spirit of Islam is as follows:

> Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being righteous toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly. Allah only forbids you from those who fight you because of religion and expel you from your homes and aid in your expulsion - [forbids] that you make allies of them. And whoever makes allies of them, then it is those who are the wrongdoers.[64]

These verses make it clear that Muslims are not obligated to fight against non-Muslims only for their differences in religion. Islam only allows fighting against those non-Muslims who initiate fighting against Islam and Muslims as well as ousting them from their houses only because they follow Islam. Al-Ṭabari comments on these Qur'anic verses that Muslims must be fair and just while conducting with non-Muslims and uphold positive relationships so long as there is no open hostility toward Islam and Muslims.[65] Al-Qurṭubi and Ibn Kathir maintain that the verses prohibit fighting with those non-Muslims who do not see Muslims as their enemies

[59] R. B. Spencer, *Religion of Peace: Why Christianity is, and Islam isn't,* 2007, Retrieved 15, 2018, from https://www.amazon.com/Religion-Peace-Christianity-Islam-Isnt/dp/1596985151.

[60] Al-Qurʾan, 9: 29.

[61] M. Elius et al., "Islam as a religion of tolerance and dialogue", *Op. cit.,* pp. 96-109.

[62] M. R. M. Nor *et al.*, "Analysing the Conceptual Framework of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Relationship in Islam", *Op. cit.,* pp. 309-334.

[63] A. K. Abdullah, *The Qurʾan and Normative Religious Pluralism: A Thematic Study of the Qurʾan.* (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2014), p. 211.

[64] Al-Qurʾan, 60: 8-9.

[65] M. I. J. al- Ṭabari, *Jamiʿ al-Bayan fi Taʾwil al- Qurʾan,* (Beirut: Muassasah al-Risalah, 2000), p. 321.

and fight against them.[66]So, there is no room for fighting for Muslims against non-Muslims only because they do not follow Islam; rather, it has been permitted only as a defensive tactic when the other party attacks Muslims and deprives them of their rights.

Analysing the verse, M. W. Khan divides the twenty-three years of the revealing period of the Qur'anic verses into two segments: twenty years of peaceful time between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the rest three-year wartime between them; the Qur'anic verses related to war belong to the later segment while the verses related to peace, justice, morality, and worship of God belongs to the former segment. So, this verse does not provide a general rule for Muslims.[67]

In the same way some other Quranic verses have also been criticised by the opponents. For examples, the Qur'an states: "The believers should not make the disbelievers their allies rather than other believers – anyone who does such thing will isolate himself completely from God- except when you need to protect yourselves from them. God wants you to beware of Him: The final return is to God".[68]

This verse is misunderstood due to the lack of correct knowledge of its background of the revelation. The background of the verse is known from Abdullah ibn Abbas's narration that some Jews along with Kaʿb ibn Ashraf (the group leader) befriended a group of Muslims including al-Ḥajjaj Ibn Amar al-Anṣari intending to create dispute and misunderstanding among Muslims. Given this particular situation, Allah revealed this verse to make the Muslims aware of those particular people and their conspiracy so that they could not misguide Muslims.[69]

Another misunderstood verse of the Qur'an is: "You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies; they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them- God does not guide such wrongdoers."[70] According to one narration, the verse was revealed during the battle of *Uhud* when many Jews and Christians were the de facto enemy of the Muslims who conspired to destroy the Muslims completely and who were in a state of war.[71] Another narration

---

[66] A. A. M. Al- Qurṭubi, *Al-Jamiʿ li al-Aḥkam al-Qurʾān*, (Cairo: Dar al-Qutb al-Misriyyah, 1964), p. 58; I. I.U. I.Al-Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qurʾan al-ʿAzim,* Vol. 3, (Daru Tibbiyyah, 1999), p. 90.

[67] M. W. Khan, *Islam and World Peace*, (New Delhi: Centre for Peace and Spirituality International), 2015, p. 22.

[68] Al- Qurʾan, 3: 128.

[69] M. I. J. al- Ṭabari, *Jamiʿ al-Bayan fi Taʾwil al- Qurʾan*, *Op. cit.,* p. 53.

[70] Al- Qurʾan, 5:51.

[71] I. I. U. I. al-Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qurʾan al-Aẓim.*, Vol. 3, (Daru Tibbiyyah, 1999), p. 132.

says that the verse was revealed to inform Muslims of some hypocrites among the Jews and Christians who conspired against Muslims.[72]

To understand these verses, Said Nursi is cited by Ahmet Kurucan and Mustafa Kasim Erol that the Qurʾanic verses are always valid, but their validity depends on the behaviour of individuals in a given place and time. In a state of peace, these verses cannot be applied to non-Muslims where they are not involved in conspiracy and enmity against Muslim communities, and do not wage war.[73] This is also supported by the examples of the Prophet (PBUH) when he punished the Jews of Banu Qurayza for violating the Charter of Madinah upon the judgement of their approved arbitrator, and at the same time he maintained the treaty with another Jewish tribe, Banu Nadir.[74] Islamic scholars recommend that there is no generality, without exception, in the Qurʾan or *hadiths*.[75] Therefore, it is not right to generalise certain issue based on a particular Qurʾanic verse if some other verses carry different meanings.

Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) response to Interfaith Dialogue

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) spent his life in dialogue with people of various religions and cultures for the promotion of peace in the world.[76] He dealt with believers, disbelievers, atheists, and idolaters in the most harmonious way.[77] He equally showed solidarity with the people of all religions, cultures, and ideologies. Positive engagement in solving societal problems was always the priority of Muhammad (PBUH) even before he achieved Prophethood.[78] He did not differentiate in treating Muslims and non-Muslims, and used to visit both Muslims and non-Muslims with equal importance while sick.[79]

There is no example where the Prophet (PBUH) showed hatred to anybody, even his enemies.[80] This is evidenced when the disbelievers persecuted the Prophet (PBUH)

---

[72] A. A. M. al-Qurṭubi, *Al-Jami li al-Aḥkam al-Qurʾan*, *Op. cit.,* p. 216.
[73] A. Kurucan and MK Erol, *Dialogue in Islam: Qurʾan- Sunnah- History*, (London: Dialogue Society, 2012), p. 100.
[74] Ibid, p. 42.
[75] M.H. Hasan, "Interpreting Islam and Plural Society", *Op. cit.,* pp. 99- 121.
[76] M. Zia-ulHaq, "Muslims' participation in interfaith dialogue: challenges and opportunity", *Op. cit.,* p. 632.
[77] A. Kurucan and M. K. Erol, *Dialogue in Islam: Qurʾan- Sunnah- History*, *Op. cit.,* p. 70.
[78] A. A. M. I. Hisham, *Sirah al-Nawawiyyah,* Vol. 1, (Egypt: Shakira Maktaba, 1955), p. 157.
[79] M. I. I. al- Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, (Egypt: Sharikah Maktabah wa Maṭbaʿah Muṣṭafa Albani Al-Ḥubla, 1975), p. 328.
[80] M.R.M. Nor *et al.*, "Analysing the Conceptual Framework of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Relationship in Islam", *Op. cit.,* pp. 309-334.

bitterly in Ṭaʾif while preaching Islam, he did not expect their destruction. Instead, he asked God to forgive them.[81] In his Prophetic life in Makkah, the polytheists caused inhuman suffering to him and his companions, and cut off all kinds of societal relationships; even they boycotted the Prophet and his companions for about three years. However, when the Prophet (PBUH) conquered Makkah in 622 CE, instead of taking revenge, he declared amnesty.[82] This is the symbol of Prophet's (PBUH) love for humanity irrespective of race, religion and ethnicity.[83]

Generally, a country where people of different religions live needs to have a common code of conduct to maintain peace and harmony. Such a common code of conduct came from the state of Madinah established by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). When Prophet (PBUH) migrated to Madinah and established an Islamic state, Muslims were not the majority there. Instead, Jews and Christians were the majority. The Prophet made a constitution, famously known as the 'charter of Madinah', with the agreement of all parties irrespective of their religious and ethnic backgrounds. This constitution allows the followers of every religion to perform their religion freely. There wasno interference in the practices of any religion.[84] The charter was made to form a community based on common interests.

The Prophet (PBUH) made many treaties with non-Muslims to establish peace and harmony in society. He made a peace treaty with Najran Christians which is considered as the earliest example of interfaith dialogue in Islam. The Prophet (PBUH) permitted the Christians to perform their prayers in his mosque, and Christian and Muslims performed their prayers under the same roof.[85] This treaty was maintained throughout the Prophetic and caliphate period.[86]Another treaty of the Prophet was with Ḥarith ibn Kaʿb and his tribe. The Prophet ensured the complete freedom of their religious practices.[87]

The treaty of Hudaibiyyah is a breakthrough of interfaith dialogue in the history of Islam. This unlocked the door of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslims were relatively strong at the time of the treaty. Despite, Muslims accepted

---

[81] M. Elius *et al.*, "Interreligious Dialogue: An Islamic Approach". *KATHA,* Vol. 15, 2019, pp. 1-19

[82] Mohammad Elius, "Understanding Religious Diversity, Tolerance and Peace-buildings: An Islamic Approach", *Op. cit.,* pp. 51-74.

[83] M. Elius *et al.*, "Interreligious Dialogue: An Islamic Approach", *Op. cit.,* pp. 01-19

[84] I. Khan *et al*., "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam", *Op. cit.,* pp. 1-10.

[85] M. R. M. Nor *et al.,* "Analysing the Conceptual Framework of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Relationship in Islam", *Op. cit.,* pp. 309-334.

[86] A. Y. Yaqub, *Khirāj*, (Al-Qahirah: Maktabah al-Azhariyyah, n.d.), pp. 84-87.

[87] A. Kurucan and MK Erol, *Dialogue in Islam: Qurʾan- Sunnah- History*, *Op. cit.,* p. 80.

several terms raised by the opponent contrary to their interests in order to avoid conflicts between them. This shows the sincerity of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) in establishing peace in society.[88] It is noteworthy that clause 5 of the treaty was against Muslims as it said: "If a man from the Quraish, without his guardian's permission, joins Muhammad, he shall be returned, but if someone from Muhammad's group comes to the Quraish, he shall not be returned."[89] This was in fact humiliating for the Muslims. That is why the companions of the Prophet (PBUH) were not ready to accept this proposal. The Prophet (PBUH) calmed them by saying: "We want peace and accepted their proposal only for peaceful coexistence and interfaith harmony.[90]

Besides, the Prophet (PBUH) showed utmost compassion and generosity to his neighbours. He asked Muslims to consider their neighbours as themselves. He also emphasised on supporting neighbours in need. It is reported by Ibn Abbas that the Prophet of Islam warned: "He cannot be a true Muslim who makes his stomach full leaving his neighbours hungry at his side"[91] Again, the Prophet did not tolerate those who caused sufferings to their neighbours. That is why he further said: "He cannot be a genuine believer, the Prophet (PBUH) mentioned three times, from whose hands his neighbour is not safe".[92] It is noteworthy that the Prophet did not distinguish his neighbours based on their religions. A neighbour may be a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jain, a Christian or even an unbeliever. According to the direction of the Prophet (PBUH), a Muslim's responsibility is to feed and serve his/her neighbours without considering their tribal or religious affiliation.

The Prophet (PBUH) paid special attention and homage to non-Muslims during his Prophetic life. It is narrated that "once the Prophet (PBUH) saw a funeral procession crossing him. He (the Prophet) stood up while witnessing. Then the Prophet was informed that the dead body was of a Jew. Hearing this, the Prophet replied, was he not a human being?".[93] This tradition clarifies how the Prophet (PBUH) showed love and respect to the people of other religions.

---

[88] I. Khan *et al.*, "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam", *Op. cit.,* pp. 1-10.

[89] K. Yasir, "Political Foresight of the Prophet: A Textual Analysis of the Treaty of Hudaibiya", 2015. Retrieved March 13, 2020 from https://www.academia.edu/20267103/Hudaibiya_Treaty_-_A_Textual_Analysis.

[90] Sulhul Hudaibiyah: The Peace Treaty with Quraysh, Retrieved 13 March, 2020, from https://www.academia.edu/38288354/Treaty_of_hudaybiyyah.

[91] A. Ali, *Kanz al-Ummal fi Sunan al-Aqwalwa al- Afʿal,* (Beirut: Muʾassasah al-Risalah, 1981), p. 53

[92] Ibid, 509.

[93] M.I. I. Al-Bukhari, *Al-Bukhari in Mawsu'ah al-Ḥadithh al-Sharif al-Kutub al-Sittah*, (Riyad: Dār al-Salam, 2000), p. 102.

Conclusion

The study shows that interfaith dialogue is one of the crucial issues in the present socio-political circumstance of the world. Islam accepts interfaith dialogue as a necessary means for maintaining sustainable peace and harmony in the world. That is why the journey of Islam has been advocating sincere relations with the people of other religions since its inception in the 7th century Arabia. The Qurʾanic teachings and the Prophet's dealings prove that Islam provides equal opportunity to the people of all religions. Though a few Qur'anic verses appear clashing to peace and harmony among religions, upon examination, it is verified that these verses were revealed in a given situation when certain non-Muslims were involved in conspiracy, hostility and waged war against Muslims. In normal situation, these verses cannot be applied. Besides, the Prophet (PBUH) was the embodiment of the Qur'an. He spent his entire life dealing with Muslims and non-Muslims alike. He equally showed solidarity to people of all religions, cultures, and ideologies. From his boyhood he had been engaged in solving societal problems for people to live in peace. Furthermore, there is no example where the Prophet (PBUH) showed hatred or enmity to anybody because of religion. He always prayed to God for the forgiveness of his enemies. The Prophet (PBUH) formed an ideal community in Madinah including Muslims, Jewish, polytheistic, and other ethnic groups where there was a common legal, economic, military, and political goal. In his model state of Madinah, the Prophet (PBUH) ensured complete freedom of religion. He also made many treaties and agreements with non-Muslims for strengthening interrelationships and promoting interfaith harmony. Finally, it can be said that Islam is a home of promoting unity, peace and harmony among humanity irrespective of the religious convictions of the people.