

Inter-religious Dialogue and Peaceful Social World System: An Approach to Eastern Religions!

Prof. Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi

While I was doing my Masters Degree in philosophy at A M U Aligarh, we had a paper on Hindu philosophy, and that is when I was first exposed to other religions. Then, I shifted to the Department of theology at the same Aligarh Muslim University for an M.A. in Islamic Theology. As part of our course work, we had a paper in Comparative Religions, so I got a chance to study various religions other than Islam. After that, I was regularly invited to speak on the Islamic perspective on dialogue at inter-religious dialogue seminars and conferences. In 1991 I was appointed by the World Forum for Inter-Religious Councils Kerala as their secretary at their Cochin conference. At their 1999 meeting I was made their youth convenor.

The WIRFC held another big meeting in Kerala in 2000, at which I spoke on the role of religion in promoting harmony.

The urgency of initiating and promoting dialogue between Muslims and others was felt by me long back when Kashmir was burning in the early nineties? I think it is the need of the hour. While in Kerala in 2000 and afterwards at several occasions, I had the chance to address small and big gatherings of Muslims, including students intelligentsia and Ulama. There I made the point that dialogue is in fact a religious duty for Muslims. In 2000, in such gathering which was organised by Kerala Muslims in the honour of Dr Iftikhar Yahya of USA and myself I had said that many centuries ago, Shankaracharya came from Kerala all the way to Kashmir to study Buddhism in order to know what challenges Brahmanism faced from the Buddhists, as at that time Kashmir was a great centre of Buddhist learning, but now I had come to Kerala from Kashmir to impress upon the need for Muslims to have a dialogue with others so as to clear all the misconceptions that they have about Islam. I told the Ulama who were present there that although it was their Islamic duty to enter into -dialogue with others they were not doing little in that regard. I said that if they were not able to initiate such work on their own, at least they should cooperate with non-Muslims who are making efforts in this field.

The dialogue should take a very natural form especially when Muslims get involved in this as a mode of *Dawah*. The Holy Qur'an tells us that we should not abuse the

idols or deities worshipped by others, otherwise they would react and, in turn, abuse God out of ignorance. It commands us to call others to Islam, but there is to be no compulsion at all involved. If someone listens to that call and decides to become a Muslim, well and good. If, on the other hand, he chooses not to accept Islam, that is his own concern, and then, as the Holy Qur'an says, "to them their religion and to you your religion". The Holy Qur'an very clearly tells us that we should present the 'invitation' [*Dawah*] to Islam to others with wisdom [*hikmah*] and words of 'beauty' [*hasanah*]. What this suggests is that besides the content of the message what is equally important is the style of communicating that message. We believe that the content of our message as contained in the Holy Qur'an and the *Hadith* [the traditions of the Prophet]-are perfect, but we have not adopted the proper means and style of presenting that message. There is presently such a communication gap between Muslims and others that they cannot understand each other. Further, much misunderstanding has been created about Islam by many people either out of hatred or ignorance, but Muslims have not been able to dispel these wrong notions.

I see that as a crucial element in the dialogue process. What is more, I believe that through dialogue others may see how Islam has an answer to many of the ills plaguing the world today-the collapse of morality, alcoholism, world debt, for instance. The dialogue process should not remain limited simply to exchanging views between dialoguing groups about their religious beliefs but it should go beyond verbal exchanges. Explaining the teachings of one's own religion and understanding the beliefs of others is, of course, a central element of the dialogue process. But there is another level of dialogue which Islam teaches us about-the need for people of different religious communities to act together to attain certain desirable social goals. This is dialogue at the level of social action. Thus, when the Prophet Muhammad [peace and Allah's blessings be upon him] arrived in Madinah, he entered into a pact with the Jews of the town. This pact is remembered in Islamic history as the *Misaq-i-Madinah* or 'The Treaty of Madinah'. According to this treaty, the Muslims and the Jews were to help each other in times of need and in defending Medina from outside attack.

It is on the basis of this pact that some Indian *Ulama* called for a united struggle of Muslims, Hindus and others against British imperialism. What we learn from the example of the Treaty of Madinah is that for the sake of common goals, Muslims can certainly cooperate with others.

The Holy Qur'an explicitly commands us that we should help each other in doing good and in pious deeds and in fighting oppression, but not in assisting each other in sin and oppression. We have an ideal model in this regard in the Holy Prophet Muhammad [peace and Allah's blessings be upon him], who, even before God had announced his Prophethood, had set up an organisation of poor youth in Makkah, called the *Half-ul-Fuzul*, to help the poor and the needy. Now this was a time before the announcement of Muhammad's prophet hood, so the other members of the *Half-ul-Fuzul* were all non-Muslims. When the first revelation from God was delivered to the Holy Prophet by the angel Hazrat Jibrail [Gabriel] on Mount Hira, the Prophet was taken aback and he related the incident to his wife, Hazrat Khadijah. She told him not to worry and that God would protect him as he had always helped the oppressed, the poor, the orphans and widows. Now, at that time, there were no other Muslims in Makkah, and all these people whom the Prophet used to help were, of course, non-Muslims.

So, this very clearly suggests that Muslims can and must help the poor and the suffering whoever they might be, and for that they can cooperate with people of good will from other communities. This, too, is a form of dialogue, and it must also be part of any inter-religious dialogue process that Muslims initiate with others.

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND ULAMA

The Ulama must play a central role in all the processes of inter-Religious dialogue, but I do not see that happening in any major way today. I was asked once by S Ausaf Ali, the former Director of Islamic Institute of Islamic Studies New Delhi and presently the Director of Hamdard Archives, Hamdard University few years back a curious question about the possible cause of the overall degeneration of the condition of Muslim Ummah especially in the context of Indian subcontinent. I without given any second thought had remarked :the institution of Ulama .He asked me to reconsider my remark ,I once again remarked :institution of Ulama .Then I thought seriously on the subject for some time ,I still believed it was the institution of Ulama .But after the deep analysis of the subject I made one amendment in my previous remark that it actually was the inertia of our

Ulama (*Ulama ka jamood*), which has led to such a deplorable condition of Muslim Ummah in the present world. Because our earlier Ulama were facing the challenges of the times with open mind without any qualms as was the case of Ghazzali, Ibn Taimiyyah and even Shah Wali Allah of Delhi who could gauge the challenges of their times and stemmed the tide against Islam and Muslims by their proactive role in order to arrest the degeneration from setting in in the rank and file of Muslim Ummah. They studied the prevalent sciences of their respective eras and came out with the befitting reply to all issues which could or were posing any ideological challenge to Islam. Ghazzali studied Greek philosophy and sciences for several years meticulously .Ibn Taimiyyah assessed the impact of Greek logic and alien thoughts on Islamic theology and society, Shah Wali of Delhi understood challenges posed to Islam by the western forces and other contenders and prepared to respond to the challenges of his times.

The problem with most of our day *Ulama* is that they have divided knowledge into water-tight categories of 'religious' [*dini*] and 'worldly' [*duniyavi*], even though in Islam there is no such distinction actually. Islam tells us that acquiring knowledge of the world, of God's creation, for the sake of religion [*din*] is a religious duty [*farz*] binding on all Muslims. Further, Islam tells us that since God has created the world, knowledge of the world, too, must be acquired by every believer, for knowledge of the world is part of the knowledge of God. So, I am convinced that until and unless we get rid of this artificial distinction that has been created between *dini* and *duniyavi* knowledge, we cannot make much headway in promoting not only the dialogue process but also the social, economic and educational betterment of the Muslim community itself. It is also because of this rigid distinction that has developed over time as regards knowledge that the Ulama are not playing any effective role in this age of science and technology today. How many Ulama do we have today who are abreast of the latest developments in science? Almost none, I am afraid, and the most important reason for this is that knowledge of the world has been seen as distinct and different from religious knowledge, which, to reiterate, is a very un-Islamic way of understanding what knowledge is all about. And what is equally important to realise is that we did have Muslim Ulama in the past that actually played a key role in scientific advancement as well.

Nowadays in our madrassas much emphasis is laid on the jurisprudential aspects of Islam that too from the sectarian angle and the studies of the Quran and Hadith remain secondary or sometimes subservient to the Fiqh.

The *Taqlid* has become the order of the day and even scholars of the stature of Anwar Shah Kashmiri say that he was follower so far as the Fiqh is concerned otherwise in all other subjects he is the Mujahid. He is reported to have said that he has spent his whole life in making the Ummah Hanafi. Same is the case with other Ulama belonging to other schools of thought like Barelwies who have assumed a separate status in the Fiqh of Hanfi and have started their own interpretation about almost all the important Islamic doctrines. The Nadwis Islahis and Falahis are no exception to this trend as all of these schools of thought perpetuate the personality cult or sectarian interpretation of the universal Islamic teachings. Jamat Islami and Ahli Hadith don't present any better picture either. As they had started with a new slogan of returning back to the Quran or Hadith, they have finally lapsed into the worst kind of sectarianism or factionalism finally bordering the cult worship. I was astonished to see few years back the separate mosques of Jamat Islami in Kerala. This was a horrible experience for me.

Barring Tabligi Jammah almost all organisations have forgotten the preaching of Islam as the mission of their existence and resorted to pity politics or sectarianism of worst kind assuming the status of national or factional segments of Muslims rather than espousing the cause of Islam as a panacea to the world ailments.

Besides the Ulama of the madrassas, I see our other intellectuals as having a crucial role in promoting dialogue between Muslims and people of other faiths. But here too we find 'modern', Western educated Muslims hardly doing anything to carry forward this mission. The education system that they have gone through is so thoroughly westernised that they have little knowledge of Islam and the legacy of their ancestors. My point is that both the Madrasah-trained Ulama and those who have been through the university system have their own roles to play in promoting inter-religious dialogue, which, unfortunately, they are not really doing. The first thing to do is to do away with the artificial and un-Islamic divide between *dini* and *duniyavi* knowledge. Islam teaches us to consider anyone with knowledge, whether of Islamic law or of the laws of physics, as Ulama, provided, in the case of the latter, they interpret the disciplines in which they are specialised in the light of the teachings of Islam.

Inter-religious dialogue in Kashmir?

There has always been interaction and dialogue between Muslims and people of other faiths in Kashmir ever since

Islam made its entry into our land. One of the pioneers of this process was the fourteenth century female mystic Lal Ded, whom the Kashmiri Hindus revere as Laleshwari. During Ameer-i-Kabir's stay in Kashmir from 1379-1380 to 1385-86, she had several meetings with him and she is reported to have met Nooruddin of Chrar several occasions and impressed him through her spiritual acumen. In this regard what Sir Richard Temple writes in his book *Lal Vaakh* is very important?

He says that though Lal Ded was a Hindu and the follower of Shiva religion and her views a representation of her beliefs. Still there was a great interplay of the Sufi teaching in her philosophy" According to a Kashmiri historian :-"Even when the political conflicts were raging round the Valley in medieval times, the masses were receiving instructions from their two great saints, Lalla Ded and Shaikh Nur-ud-din Wali. They sang the songs of mutual love and affection which "stirred the souls of Hindus and Muslims alike to their deepest depths".

Thus the culture of mutual understanding and perpetual inter religious, inter personal and inter- community dialogue has had been the permanent feature of our cultural ethos. What is more important is that even women have taken this process to the highest pinnacle starting from Lal Ded, who according to some scholars was the founder of Kashmiri language also, to the *Charat Kuri*, the classmate ladies in the seminary of Hazrat Nooruddin Nurani, like *Bahut Ded*, *Shangah Bibi* and *Hazrat Sham Bibi*. In this way, as said earlier, the one important contributing factor for emergence of this culture was appearance of Lal Ded who was a fourteenth century *Saivite* woman, who seems to be under the influence of Islam as she vehemently attacked caste system, idol worship and rituals evolved by the Brahmins. She was elevated to the status of the Second Rabia (*Rabia Thani*), the local Mary (*Maryam-i-Makani*), the Gnostic lost in God consciousness (*Arifa Majzuba*), the rationalist lover of God (*Majnun-I-Aqila*), etc in the Kashmiri *Tadhkira* literature. Not only this she has been praised by a very famous Kashmiri Suharwardi Sufi, Baba Daud Khaki, who says that she was passionately loving One God and had a "draught of *ahd-e-ala*" (i.e. the pledge the souls of all human beings had entered into with their Lord on the specific day before creation of the universe,) which indicated that she was influenced by the *Tawhidic* and Sufi traditions of Islam otherwise it was not possible that she could be remembered by one of the stalwart Islamic Sufis of Kashmir with such a reverence. Muslim Sufis have revered her in the best possible respectful manner, though her so called Hindu co- religious chroniclers have maintained a conspicuous

silence about her life and even existence. The first authentic source of information about Lal Ded and her poetry is *Asrar-ul Abrar* (1654) of Baba Da'ud Khaki who wrote about her and all these details provided by these great Muslim luminaries have added to the legends associated to her. There was a great interplay of the Sufi teaching in her philosophy.

Although she was born and brought up in a Brahmin family, she came under the influence of renowned Muslim scholars and mystics, which then led to her crusading against Brahminical hegemony and the oppression of the so-called lower castes. In her poetry, or *Vakh*, she addresses both Hindus as well as Muslims, and talks forcefully about social equality and the oneness of God, which are actually Islamic concepts. Lal Ded was followed by Hazrat Nooruddin Nurani, commonly remembered as Nund Rishi, who carried forward this dialogue process, as a result of which many Hindu sadhus later became his disciples. The story is told of Bam Sadh, the priest of a temple, meeting Hazrat Nooruddin and asking him, 'Who is a true Muslim?' Hazrat Nooruddin answers, 'A true Muslim is one who thinks he is even lower than a leper, one who spends his entire life serving the poor'. What is this but a process of dialogue? It is said that on hearing Hazrat Nooruddin's reply Bam Sadh became a Muslim and Hazrat Nooruddin gave him the name of Baba Bamuddin.

Actually Kashmir was at the gate way of many cultures civilisations and ideas from very beginning. Buddhism was having hold here for about 600 years and Hinduism being

once the dominant religion for centuries together. Even the Zoroastrians and Jews had also frequented to Kashmir in medieval and in some cases even in ancient times. Christian travellers and missionaries have never lagged behind from others in their attention paid to Kashmir. All these factors played a great role so far as mutual interaction exchange of ideas and influence is concerned. Kashmiris being very intelligent race have tried always to keep the channels of communication open even with their oppressors. The impact of this all acculturation and assimilation of the ideas and views of so many religions and philosophies finally paved way for the process of Islamisation of Kashmir which in my view is the final fate of all interactions and exchanges if carried on honesty and with earnestness. Because Islam has such a force and resilience in itself that if it is given chance to interact with other religions and philosophies it finally reigns supreme but if Muslims remain indolent and don't allow Islam to prove its mettle vis a vis other competing weltanschauungen then the real essence of Islam remains hidden from the eyes of vigilant.

Unfortunately, we have not as yet started dialogue in an organised way, in the form of a movement. I often quote the famous saying of Jesus: "Love thy neighbour as thy self", - and I add that when we do not even know our neighbours how can we love them? Thus, the first need is to know your neighbour, his culture, his ethos, history, sensitivities and religious beliefs. Such knowledge is a prerequisite for organised dialogue initiatives.

Swiss Tourism's Sorry to Oprah Over Racism

Talk show host Oprah Winfrey says she encountered racism while shopping in Switzerland and the national tourism office agrees. One of the world's richest women – she earned \$77 million in the year ending in June – M.S. Winfrey told the U.S. Program "Entertainment Tonight" that a shop assistant in Zurich refused to show her a handbag because it was "too expensive" for her. A spokeswoman for the Swiss tourism office, Danieja Baer, told The Associated Press on Friday "We are very sorry for what happened to her. "The tourism office also posted an apology on Twitter, saying "this person acted terribly wrong".