

Aligarh Journal of Interfaith Studies



Peer Reviewed, , Open Access International Journal
ISSN: 2582-7553 | Impact Factor | ESTD Year 2020

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THE CULTURE OF DIFFERENCE: Critical Discussion based on Acceptance of Differences

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History Published Online:</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Religious Differences• Religious conflict• Interfaith Dialogue• Peace-building `	<p>The history of religions and schools of thought is full of religious wars and conflicts; but in parallel with religious violence, thinkers of religions and denominations, have been looking for a way to end these strife and violence. In this Paper an attempt is ad to present a Theory which may constitute framework of interaction and Dialogue among follower of different religion, as well as among the various sects and schools of a religion.</p> <p>The Papers examines and surveys different approaches which exist. They include: (1) Negative approaches based on the negation of others. (2.) The Approach of Focus on Commonalities. Here the Approach is produced which dwells not only on commonalities but also on understanding the differences and viewpoint of others. This is the Approach of Critical dialogue based on accepting differences</p>



Introduction

The history of religions and schools of thought is full of religious wars and conflicts; but in parallel with religious violence, thinkers of religions and denominations, have been looking for a way to end these strife and violence. In other words, despite the existence of peaceful teachings among all religions and sects, why fire of conflicts and differences sometimes break out between them and cause a lot of material and spiritual damages?

Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that one of the most important questions in the history of religions which is very ancient like the history of the world is this fundamental question. While keeping in view the diversity among different religions, what type of relationship and interaction should be there between the religions?

Reply of the followers of the religions to this key question has not been uniform, and it has included a range of extremist and totalitarian answers, as well as approximate and tolerant answers. While some of the answers have healed religious rifts, some have widened the gap and deepened the religious divide. This study seeks to provide a model entitled "Critical discourse based on



acceptance of differences", which is called "Culture of Differences" for short, while critically reviewing different perspectives on the interaction between religions.

Interaction Levels

It is sometimes assumed that the point of discussion is simply the interaction and dialogue between different religions with different teachings; in the sense that it is a dialogue between Hinduism and Islam or Christianity and Judaism and Buddhism, but if we look closely, we will see well that religious conflicts are not limited to religions, intra-religious or inter-religious issues are also very common among the world's major religions. In Islam, there are Shiite and Sunni denominations, and in the heart of the Sunni religion, there are four Sunni schools of thought, or in Shiaism, there are Zaydi, Ismaili and Twelver schools of thought. There is Christianity which includes Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism, and dozens of other small and large denominations, Hinduism and its branches is another story. For this reason, it can be said that the levels of interaction are sometimes inter-religious and sometimes intra-religious. In the meantime, the model that wants to organize the



way of interaction and dialogue between religions, must also have the power to organize and manage interfaith dialogue and interaction within a religion; what is more, sometimes violent conflicts and disputes within religion are far more than inter-religious disputes.

The Takfiri mischief in the Islamic world or the thirty-year religious wars in Europe are proofs of this claim.

Approaches

In reply to the question of what relations between religions and sects should be? Two macro approaches are formed, each of which has a variety of implications:

1. Negative approach

A negative approach refers to those dogmas that are based on the negation of others. In this approach, by emphasizing the legitimacy of the desired dogma, other dogmas are considered invalid and rejected in various forms and ways. Accordingly, the only path to interfaith relations is their denial and critique. The following negative approach and also various approaches can be seen which in brief, are like criterions of violence and



extremism and they can be divided into the following groups, respectively:

A) The Dogmatists

The dogmatists in this study are carelessly referred to as those who see the only way for religions to interact with each other not on the basis of dialogue, but on the basis of imposing and forcing the adversary to accept their views. Although this group does not believe in physical conflicts and violence, it does not believe in mutual dialogue between religions or denominations, and only with a totalitarian approach, does it consider only itself justified in inviting religions and denominations to interact with them. They think their own religion to be the only true faith and believe in the theoretical falsification of other religions and sects. In this method, by highlighting the weaknesses and contradictions of other religions and sects, all efforts are made to refute others and prove themselves. In this model, even inaccurate and unrealistic attitudes towards the opposition are allowed to confront their opinions and, as a result, people stay away from them. Such a trend can be clearly seen by looking at the many



books of denial that have been written about other religions and denominations.

The main problem with this method is that although those who believe in this method do not believe in war and physical and violent clashes between religions, and seemingly express their method as dialogue-based, but such a model causes pessimism between religions and sects; and it is the basis for violent and extremist behavior.

In other words, religious leaders may indeed oppose violence and behavioral extremism in the realm of religion, but the masses do not distinguish between thought and behavior, and practically extremist and totalitarian thoughts rule over the masses leading them to become extremists.

In the same way, such an approach is also contrary to rational and narration reasons. According to the intellect and logic that God has given him, man should study and research far from prejudices in order to reach the truth, and not refute their beliefs based on his preconceived beliefs and before hearing the views of others. The Quran also states:

“Those who listen to the word, then follow the best of it; those are they whom Allah has guided,



*and those it is who are the men of understanding.”
(Surah Zumar 39:18)*

Such an approach would also lead to inaccurate cognitions and false attitudes toward religions and false accusations, and ultimately deepen religious divisions.

B) Extremists

After the dogmatists, there are extremists, who do not merely engage in theological debates and refute the views of others, but in addition to scientific confrontations, explicitly allow the strategy of insulting, excommunicating and completely wrong relations with other religions and denominations. They practically mobilize masses against other religions and denominations. In the view of this group, any interaction and communication with others is wrong and the way they are treated is also based on humiliation and discrimination. A brief survey of some of the extremists' satellite networks can be counted as implications of this group. This trend, which has gradually taken over the space of satellite and virtual networks almost from the beginning of the present century, simply insults the sanctities of other religions and denominations, not in the



scientific space, but entirely in the emotional space. This group plays the most important role in creating violent and *takfiri* currents, and the current *takfiri* situation is the result of this group's activities. It can be said that apart from the instrumental uses of *takfiri* movements, one of the most important reasons is the creation of *takfiri* groups in this category.

C) Takfiris

Practical *takfiris* or violent extremists are at the extremes of the negative approach. In addition to theoretical *takfir*, this group draws the limits of *takfir* into practice and officially considers the blood and property of followers of other religions and sects permissible. Such a trend is seen not only in interfaith conflicts but also within religions and between denominations.

According to this view, the way to end conflict and dispute between religions is through strife. Communication with others is their intellectual and physical elimination and the rule of a single reading of a religion or denomination. Looking at history, we can see traces of this method in many sectors. Thirty years of religious wars in Europe between Christian religions between 1618 and 1648,



Wahhabism in the twelfth century A.H., religious ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the 1990's, *takfiri* movements among Muslims in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, in the last decade or two and the ethnic and religious ethnic cleansing in Myanmar that began in 2016 and still exists more or less, are examples of such a situation.

Of course, the pragmatic *takfiri* current does not come into being by itself; rather, unless there is a theoretical infrastructure and thinkers have not theorized extremist and violent theories, there is less room for such enmities. Misconceptions of some religious leaders about sacred texts, *takfiri fatwas* of some religious leaders, the Huntington theory of the Clash of Civilizations and the theory of apocalyptic wars, the extremist theories of anti-Islamic rightists and white supremacists in European countries, are all examples of theoretical dimensions of negative approaches.

Meanwhile, politicians also use these currents as tools to achieve their goals.

Pathology of Negative Approaches

With a cursory glance at the results and consequences of negative methods, it can be seen



that these methods have had very unfortunate consequences for the religious community. First, the main goal of the negativists, which is to eliminate rivals and achieve a society with a single reading of religion, has practically not happened and has only caused a lot of damage and destruction. Today, despite the Thirty Years' War, none of the official religions of Christianity have been eliminated. Despite the widespread killings of *Takfiris* in Islamic countries, all religions are present in these areas, and only destruction and irreparable material and spiritual damage have befallen everyone. Second, all these actions and behaviors have only increased mistrust between followers of religions and sects, and have severely delayed positive dialogue and interaction. At the heart of these animosities is the recognition of religions and denominations on the basis of slander, suspicion and false accusations, and since the principle is not based on the understanding of the other side, religions and denominations are considered enemies of each other. Third: the misdeeds of the stubborn have caused the view of religion and its teachings to decline sharply among the masses, especially the youth, and the idea that



religion is the cause of insecurity and strife has become widespread. Especially since anti-religious people take advantage of this situation.

2. Positive approach

Positive approach unlike the negative methods, does not believe in physical or mental elimination of the adversaries, but believes in positive interaction and method. According to this theory, followers of religions and sects should not seek to eliminate each other physically or mentally, but because God has created them as intelligent beings with thought and contemplation and having the power to choose between right and wrong, they should choose ways to interact and talk to each other and avoid conflict and extremism.

But just as negative methods can be divided into different levels and types, positive methods can also be divided into different types. From the spectrums in which acceptance and interaction with other religions and denominations is done solely for the purpose of influencing and inviting, and its ultimate application is the insightful approach to religion or faith, so that for the spectrum that does not believe in the existence of a single truth, all



religions are based on religious pluralism leaving no room for discussion at all.

Such a wide range of methods has raised the fundamental question of which of the positive methods can actually end disputes and bring about peaceful coexistence among the religious masses and create rapprochement between leaders of religions and sects?

To get closer to the answer, the positive approach can be divided into the following methods:

A) Proximists

In this method, commonalities play a pivotal role in closeness and interaction between religions. Accordingly, the leaders and followers of religions and sects, by forgetting the points of difference that, according to this group, cause distance and deepening of religious divisions, recognize common points and work hard to strengthen these commonalities and focus on them. In this viewpoint, entering into disputes will lead to pessimism and ultimately create conflicts between religions and denominations, and will widen gaps. To prove their claim, this group also refers to some verses of Holy Quran:



“Say: O followers of the Book! come to an equitable proposition between us and you that we shall not serve any but Allah and (that) we shall not associate aught with Him, and (that) some of us shall not take others for lords besides Allah; but if they turn back, then say: Bear witness that we are Muslims.” (Surah Aale Imran 3:64)

But the main problem with this model is the fact that while paying attention to commonalities and avoiding differences may pave the way for convergence and closeness between religions, this convergence and closeness will be temporary and differences will always follow. The veil of negligence will not remain and will eventually be revealed. Also, those who do not believe in dialogue and have chosen negative methods are always ready to ignite disputes and create discord, while communists, due to lack of input and consequently unfamiliarity with disputes, will not have the power to respond and deal with them. Also, since those who share commonalities have not seriously entered into controversial discussions, the readings of extremists and their views and opinions, which are undoubtedly accompanied by distortion and exaggeration, will be the source of controversial discussions.



In addition, due to not entering into specific characteristics of religions, there is not enough knowledge about religions and sects, and practically because of the focus on common points, followers of religions and denominations do not know each other, and this itself is the context of creating suspicions, illusions, slanders and misunderstanding of religions and faiths towards each other; particularly, extremists explain differences with their own negative views and present distorted and inaccurate images of rival religions.

Another drawback of this approach is the reduction of proximate tolerance thresholds. Because they expect to always focus on commonalities and expressions between religions and denominations, they cannot tolerate listening to the opposite side and gradually the culture of critical dialogue that paves the way for mutual knowledge of religions and denominations and their growth and development will be forgotten.

B) Religious Tolerance

Another group of thinkers has adopted the method of religious tolerance and pluralism. In this way, all religions and denominations are



manifestations of truth that have come in various forms for the guidance and happiness of man. Accordingly, all religions and denominations have a single origin and none of them is superior to the other, and all religions and their followers are moving in the right direction, and religious leaders should not reject religious pluralism out of necessity and accept the tactics also as objective truth and reality. In this approach, all religions are right and every nation and tribe organizes its beliefs based on its own views and no religion has superiority over another.

Such an approach, in addition to blocking religious discourses and leaving no room for interaction and dialogue, is also in conflict with the pure ideas of religions. The most important philosophy of religions and denominations is the claim of human leadership towards guidance and happiness, and religions and denominations claim that by fulfilling their thoughts and teachings, man achieves happiness and salvation. This characteristic is never limited to geographical or racial and ethnic boundaries, but religions and denominations have a universal address and invite all human beings, regardless of color, race,



language and geography, to themselves and their teachings. For this reason, we are witnessing the spread of religions in different parts of the world. While the origin of many religions was in the Mesopotamia region, today these religions have taken root in all parts of the world and have not limited themselves to a specific geography or race and language. Thus, the major religions of the world and even sects within religions claim to be cosmopolitan. All the prophets and reformers of the world have come to bring a new message to man and to offer their solution to man as the path of man. The Holy Quran also addresses the Prophet of Islam:

“Call to the way of your Lord...” (Surah Nahl 16:125)

Such an address in the Holy Quran reflects the fact that the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) is commissioned to invite people to Islam. Elsewhere in the Holy Quran, it says:

“Surely We have shown him the way: he may be thankful or unthankful.” (Surah Insan 76:3)

This verse also states that the path of guidance is one and it is provided by God, but man is free to follow this path or to take the wrong path.



Therefore, if we consider the meaning of tolerance and pluralism as accepting multiple truths and the validity of all religions in the world, it is not compatible with the existential philosophy of the religions and their leaders.

Another problem with this method is the disappearance of areas of dialogue and interaction between religions. What if all religions are right, then a dialogue to prove the propositions of one religion over another is meaningless and leaves no room for common understanding between faiths. What is more, assuming that all religions are right and a way to achieve happiness, there will be no motivation to know and interact and find the truth.

On the other hand, such a tolerant approach will provoke the religious and will provoke a kind of intra-religious and inter-religious confrontation between the religious and the tolerant, which are obvious examples of this conflict between different religions and faiths.

C) Reductionists

A group has embraced reductionism and reduced the role of religion in individual and social life in order to eliminate religious differences. Accordingly, in order to eliminate tensions and



differences between religions and sects, the social and even individual role of religion in human life should be reduced, and when the role of religion diminishes and customary and civil laws arising from self-founded reason rule society there will be practically no grounds for deep religious conflicts and differences, and if there are differences, due to the absence of religion in social life, it will not affect the stability of society. Perhaps secularism, and in its more extreme form, laïcité, can be seen as a symbol of such thinking.

But this approach also faces serious challenges. First, history has shown that although at some point in time, the role of religion in society may fade, religion will return again, and it is interesting that in societies that have sought to leave religion in a state of oblivion, religion has emerged in more intense readings and formats. Turkish society and the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party and the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran are proof of this claim. Even Bobby Sayyid, in his book of 'A Fundamental Fear', argues that Westerners see the rise of religious extremism as the return of God and His revenge on Western



societies that according to Nietzsche, killed God after Renaissance.

In the same way, religion also has very valuable functions in society which, if its teachings and norms are properly implemented, will lead society towards morality and spirituality and ultimately salvation in this world and the Hereafter. Religion provides the necessary guarantees in the realm of individual and social life, not by the pressure and force of law, but by the will of the religious.

Critical Dialogue based on Accepting Differences

It was said that the existing approaches in the interaction between religions and faiths, although they have had good achievements and have been able to take positive steps in the approximation and dialogue between religions and faiths, but they have also faced problems and shortcomings, which such a situation necessitates revision and presentation of a more comprehensive plan. The design presented in this research is under positive methods, but an attempt is made to provide a more complete method considering the shortcomings of the aforementioned models.

Understanding Concepts



There are several key concepts in the model of "critical dialogue based on acceptance of differences" that before addressing the theory, these concepts should be known from the perspective of this research:

1. Conversation

One of the key concepts of this theory is dialogue. Dialogue, relying on man's power of speech, is known to be the most important characteristic of man, insofar as this is the language in the science of logic, which distinguishes between man and animal, saying: "Man is a speaking animal."

According to the Holy Quran, God taught language to man: "Taught him the mode of expression ", the purpose of power of speech and language, is dialogue. The message is conveyed in the context of language, and it is language that is the arena of communication between human beings. In this theory, dialogue is one of the key concepts and plays a strategic role. The purpose of dialogue is to understand and, ideally, to achieve unity based on common understanding.

2. Critical Nature



In this theory, dialogue is the criterion and axis that has a critical nature. In the sense that the purpose of conversation is to answer questions that have not been solved for humans. As they are commonalities that do not require serious discussion and are easily understood. The fact that all Abrahamic religions have in common the principle of monotheism does not require a serious dialogue, and the dialogue in this field is purely exploratory, not productive, and does not develop the frontiers of knowledge and cognition. Dialogue is effective and evolutionary when it comes to finding answers to questions and trying to discover truth from the heart of dialogue. The growth of science and philosophy and the interaction between religions have also arisen from the heart of such conversations. Such conversations have two main features:

First: to explain, argue and defend their teachings;

Second, they express criticisms and drawbacks that they see in the rival theory in a meticulous manner and with the following conditions:

Such a situation will cause, firstly, the other party to be fully acquainted with the views and



characteristics of the opponent, and secondly, to defend themselves or, if they are unable to respond, at least to realize their weaknesses. Such a situation is conceivable for both sides of the dialogue.

But in order for critical dialogue not to lead to strife and controversy, the third concept must also be considered.

3. Difference

Difference in this research never means strife or dispute, but it represents reality and truth called "difference" and "variance", which exists among human beings. Difference is an integral part of human life, and one can never imagine a time and place where there is no difference, however small. The causes of these differences are many and varied. From human physiological differences to goals, worldviews, aspirations and many other variables, all of which are rooted in human rationality. Such a situation has caused a multitude of differences in various political, cultural, social, religious and economic spheres etc., to pervade human society. A fact that does not exist in animal societies and only applies to humans.

From this point of view, it is clear that the difference in this research does not mean division,



separation, conflict and enmity; rather, it refers to one of the dimensions of human existence in the field of society. While difference and disputes are reprehensible, they are not only not condemned, but also contribute to the growth and excellence of society.

In the same way, it should also not be forgotten that the concept of difference in this research is completely different from the concept of otherness in theory of discourse. Alienation is usually based on the creation of conflicting dualities and depiction of an atmosphere of conflict and violence between them to create and strengthen identity. The duality of friend and foe, white and black, Christian and Muslim, Western and Eastern, and all of these are dualities that aim to create identities in the shadow of conflict. While the difference in this theory is to see differences as a fact that is present in human life.

With regard to what has been mentioned, the theory of difference is based on following rational and incidental assumptions:

1. There are no two human beings in the world of creation who are exactly alike in thought and behavior. This has not been observed even in twins.



Although there are many similarities between the twins, there are always differences in different areas of thought and behavior.

2. Human growth and excellence, in various material and spiritual fields, has been due to existence of differences and as a result of conflicting opinions and critical discourses. The frontiers of knowledge have been formed by overcoming scientific challenges caused by differences of opinion, and inventions and discoveries have emerged from the hearts of different and sometimes seemingly contradictory and contradictory opinions and views.

3. Basically, the principle of difference and diversity has been one of the issues of human identity, and the Holy Quran mentions this issue well:

“O you men! Surely we have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other...” (Surah Hujurat 49:13)

4. Difference is the result of human free will. If man did not have authority and his life was completely deterministic and followed a single trajectory, he would never have the power to choose and disagree with others, and all human



beings and their situations would always be the same. According to the Holy Quran:

“And if your Lord had pleased He would certainly have made people a single nation, and they shall continue to differ.” (Surah Hud 11:118)

The difference between human beings and other beings is free will, and this free will provides the ground for human growth or decline. Authority leads to the choice of right or wrong path and as a result differences between human beings.

5. The cause of differences is usually rooted in physiological, social, class, intellectual and similar characteristics, and this issue has caused a lot of differences resulting from these issues in human life.

4. Acceptance

What to do when a person is faced with a phenomenon called difference in his life and these differences are visible in all aspects of human life? Should differences be seen as harm to human society and should different tactics be used to treat them?

If difference is considered as a harm to human society, the dimensions of this harm will be very wide and will overshadow all aspects of human



life, and it must be said that language and intellect, which are the most important divine blessings to man, cause a harm called 'difference'. Whereas, as has been said, difference is not only not a harm, but also an opportunity for human growth and excellence in the shadow of a conflict of opinions.

In response to this problem, it should be said: when differences can be the basis of human growth and excellence that is accepted by human society, human beings should all accept that there is a difference in the nature of human social life, and if we accept this difference, we will be able to grow and benefit from the ideas and achievements of others. According to Martin Buber, "A nation that has no purpose other than to preserve and acknowledge itself is doomed to extinction."

In this theory, the principle is to accept the difference, not to tolerate the difference. Accepting the fact that differences are a natural thing in human life, and if human beings want to grow and excel in various fields, they must accept differences.

But as it turned out from other concepts, acceptance does not mean silence in the face of differences or not entering into them, but according to critical dialogue, one of the pillars of growth and



development is serious and critical entry into differences, but along with following its proper terms and features.

Terms and Conditions

It seems that if the four key concepts in this theory are put together and linked to what is defined in each passage, it will be possible to come closer to each other, achieve the truth, and finally lead to development and closeness of religions and sects.

Of course, each of the concepts has its own reasons, features and conditions that cannot be addressed in this brief discussion. For example, what are the rational and religious arguments for dialogue in religions? Similarly, what are the rational and narrative reasons for the legitimacy of critical approach and acceptance of differences, and ultimately what are the requirements for the application and operation of this theory?

All these issues are sub-topics that go beyond the heart of the theory and require careful discussion, through which it is hoped that followers of different religions and Islamic denominations would achieve a common understanding of this



theory and respond to the above questions in their religion.

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