PEACE-BUILDING THROUGH DIALOGUE AND LEARNING

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Human history has demonstrated over ages that the prime requirement for progress and development is peace. It is the fulcrum for learning and knowledge. However, society is inhabited with people of diverse faiths which causes differences and eventually leads to violence. An important principle of peace-building in matter of faiths from the Islamic perspective is to follow one and respect all. When one adopts this principle, it encourages one to be patient and tolerant towards other religions. This in turn inculcates a fundamental principle of learning from one another which helps in spiritual and religious development. It is the dialogue and learning which helps in inner engineering of a person who then becomes a catalyst for a peaceful society. Essential to peace-building is, therefore, dialogue and learning.

Key Words: Peace Building, Conflict Resolution, Conflict Management, Dialogue, Learning, Mutual Respect, Mutual Learning, Respect for all, Difference Management, Peaceful Negotiation, Avoidance**.**

PEACE-BUILDING THROUGH DIALOGUE

Peace-building is a term that is often used in the world today. Peacebuilding can be defined as a process of strengthening a society's capacity to manage conflict in non-violent ways. The premise behind peacebuilding is that conflict is natural in society and can lead to positive change. Major positive aspects of conflict are the possibility

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of positive change in society, renewal of relationships, newer opportunities, increase in productivity—due to challenge-response mechanism, and so on. Conflict resolution and management are some ways towards peacebuilding. While there are many other avenues to peacebuilding, in this article I will look into two such tools for peacebuilding—dialogue and learning, and their roots in Islam.

Human society is full of differences as differences are a natural part of life in all aspects including religions. If peace-building is the aim we have to learn the art of difference management rather than difference elimination. The emergence of difference is not in itself a bad thing. What is bad is that at the time of the arising differences the individuals concerned do not rise to the occasion. This is all the more relevant between peoples of different faiths as it is primarily between peoples of different faiths, cultures and ethnic groups that differences arise. Dialogue is a primary ethical model. In fact, the importance of interfaith dialogue in peacebuilding is essential. This is because mutual relationships should be maintained while continuing serious discussion of contentious issues. In the present world everything is designed to put man to the test. Differences also serve this purpose. Man ought to be extremely cautious, particularly at moments of contention. He should continuously strive to be tolerant lest he show some improper reaction.

What are the models of interfaith dialogue? The usual models being used for dialogue are primarily two. Firstly, there is the model of uniformity: the notion that all religions are one and the same and that we have to achieve unity among all religions. Based on the principle of oneness of religions this model has not been able to give results as it is against nature which is based on 'differences are a natural part of life. This model has failed to arrive at social harmony as the concept of the oneness or sameness of all religions is not a natural concept. In

nature, there is diversity, not uniformity. Both the material and the human worlds are based on diversity and differences. One cannot exempt religion from this universal law of diversity. You cannot find any two men or women who are exactly alike. The word 'uniformity' is found in the dictionary, but not in the human world. That is the reason that this method of dialogue has not been able to bear fruit neither achieving inter-religious understanding or social harmony.

The second model of dialogue is based on polemics and debate. Using this method people try to establish their superiority and domination over others. For them, dialogue is simply a means to try to show superiority of their religion over that of the others. This model has also not been able to attain social harmony as it further divides people rather than bringing them closer.

Peacebuilding through Dialogue by means of Peaceful Negotiations: The model prescribed by Islam is different from these two methods: neither one, oneness of religions; nor two, debate; but the third, which of peace-building through dialogue by means of peaceful negotiation. What is the aim of peaceful negotiation? Dialogue according to Islam is not undertaken to tell others about one's religion; it is undertaken with the aim of 'learning' from each other. Islam desires that participants in dialogue learn from each other and thereby enrich themselves intellectually and spiritually. It is also a means to interact with others to learn about and appreciate wise and good things in other religions. Such a dialogue achieves two objectives at the same time: one, people learn from each other and two, it brings people closer. Islam not only lays down principles of dialogue, but also gives practical demonstrations by which a culture of peace can be maintained in society by undertaking interfaith dialogue.

1. Mutual Respect—Basis of Dialogue: The first principle for conducting interfaith dialogue is given in a verse of the Quran in this way, 'lakum dinakum Waliyadin" (Quran, 109: 6) This verse explains that when establishing harmony between adherents of different religions is concerned, the best formula is "Follow one and respect all." Islam recognizes that there are differences in religion. But, at the same time, it advocates mutual respect between adherents of different faiths. This is the only realistic formula for interfaith dialogue to attain social harmony in a multi-religious society. Religious harmony means harmony between people of different religions. Giving the principle of mutual respect it is encapsulated in the concise phrase 'peaceful coexistence'.

2. Mutual Learning—Aim of Dialogue: From the Islamic perspective the aim of interfaith dialogue is to share with others for the purpose of learning from them. This formula was adopted by Umar bin al-Khattab, the second caliph of Islam. We read this about him in books: "Kana umar yatallamu min kulli ahad." Translated it literally means: 'He used to learn from everyone.'

We see that this formula is completely based on the law of nature. The Prophet of Islam said: Every Muslim, man and woman, is duty-bound to acquire learning. This tradition of the Prophet shows the importance of learning in Islam. Learning is necessary for the realization of God. That is why acquiring learning is held to be a duty for all. The Prophet of Islam once said:

"Wisdom is a believer's own lost property. He should accept it wherever he finds it."

This tradition expresses the universality of learning. This means that learning belongs to all mankind. It is a common treasure house. It is

not the monopoly of a particular person or group. It can be likened to the sun. Everyone has the right to receive light from it. Without this concept of the universality of knowledge, the progress of knowledge would just not be possible. The treasure house of knowledge is so vast that however much it is expanded; its reservoir will never be exhausted. Knowledge is a vast lake which satisfies the thirst of every seeker. And through peaceful interfaith dialogue this vast knowledge can be shared between people of the world. We can use these principles of mutual respect and mutual learning in every walk of life, in every discipline, to maintain social harmony. For example, in education, industry, business, or social life—everywhere, we try to learn from others. Mutual respect and learning are the basic formulae of life for maintaining social harmony. If we apply this universal formula to interfaith dialogue, then interfaith dialogue becomes part of the universal learning process.

Peace-building through learning: Just as mutual learning becomes the primary objective of interfaith dialogue for peacebuilding, similarly learning in general becomes a basis of peacebuilding in society, especially among the youth. Learning is the process of acquiring new or modifying existing knowledge, behaviors, skills or preferences. If peacebuilding is the aim, new approaches in learning is the essential ingredient. While many formal education courses of higher learning are available for peacebuilding the field of informal education, especially through religions holds the key to learning for peacebuilding. Let us look at the importance of learning for peace-building.

1.   **The Importance of Learning:** Learning is essential for religious and spiritual development. Setting off the process of intellectual development, it brings maturity to one's thinking. Without learning, one can neither study the sacred books, nor can one be aware of the

history of man and the universe. In short, learning brings man from the level of the animals to the level of human beings. Talking about the importance of learning, the Prophet of Islam has said: "Every Muslim, man and woman, is duty-bound to acquire learning." This tradition of the Prophet shows the importance of learning in Islam. Islam lays emphasis of learning for peacebuilding.

2. The Aptitude for Learning: The aptitude of a learner in learning is an essential component of the extent to which one learns. It is written in books of history that the second caliph, Umar Faruq, used to learn something from everyone he came in contact with. In other words, the learning process was active in him all the time.

However, this is possible only when one meets others with open minds, when one tries to learn from them instead of always wanting others to learn from oneself. It is essential for this learning process to continue uninterruptedly. The learner should be free of biased thinking, and should not wallow in self-glory. His attitude should be such that he wastes no time in taking in whatever good he receives from anyone, whatever the source. Whenever a mistake is made clear to him, he should immediately rectify it to compensate for his shortcomings. The role of the recipient in this process of learning is far more important than the role of the giver or teacher. The more he possesses this quality of right thinking, the more he will be successful in receiving from learning others. At every moment, knowledge and inspiration are being showered by God on this world. Man has only to be open-minded enough to receive them.

3. Ask Those Who Know: Seeking knowledge is essential in peacebuilding. The Quran says if you do not know then ask those who do know. That is, one who is ignorant of facts should seek correct information and thus make himself an aware person. Generally,

people do not like asking others about anything. They think that asking questions means admitting one's ignorance. This is fatal. Asking should rather be regarded as being like consulting a dictionary or an Encyclopedia. No one can learn everything on his own to compensate for the gaps in one's knowledge, one studies books. Similarly, one should develop the habit of asking questions of those who are well-informed. The knower is like a living book for the seeker of knowledge. If no bias comes in the way of reading a book, no such feeling should come in the way of putting questions to one who knows. Interacting with people, while asking them questions not only increases our knowledge, it also develops human relations.

4. Modesty: Having the courage to say, "I do not know" is important in learning. This stems from modesty. According to a saying of Prophet Muhammad: "When you do not know anything, you should say: "God knows better." This modesty is a must for intellectual development. It is not a simple matter to say 'I do not know.' In fact, there is a saying in Arabic, "Uttering the words 'I do not know' is the half of knowledge." The awareness of a man's ignorance awakens the spirit of enquiry within him which ultimately leads him towards gaining knowledge. When one does not know something, one should accept one's ignorance. Accepting one's ignorance is a step towards gaining knowledge. Without such thinking, no one can attain the goal of intellectual development.

5. Success with Patience: Patience is an important ingredient of learning for peacebuilding. The Prophet of Islam once observed, "You must know that success lies in patience." Being over-hasty is the opposite of patience. Activities indulged in in haste are without planning, while an activity patiently carried out is planned activity. In this world only that activity meets with success which is properly planned in advance. Patience is another name for a buying-time

strategy. When one is patient one is able to spend that time in productive, peacebuilding endeavors.

6.   Principled Behavior: Principled behavior is essential for peacebuilding. The Prophet of Islam, addressing his companions, said: "Should I not tell you what is good character?" They said, "Yes, certainly." Then the Prophet replied that you should join him who cuts asunder from you. You should give to those who deprive you. You should forgive those who oppress you. This can be termed unilateral ethics. But high moral character does not mean that you should give good treatment only to those who give good treatment to you. That would show a tit for tat mentality. "Do as you would be done by" expresses the principle which should be adhered to.

Principled behavior is not governed by our reaction to another's action, but is rather governed by a code of ethics. A man should rise above any base attitude displayed by others; he should instead be unilaterally governed by ethics. He should refrain from the psychology of reaction. And in no circumstance should he abandon his positive moral attitude. The greatest sign of a noble character in any individual is that, in spite of a negative reaction from others, he maintains his positive attitude.

CONCLUSION

Learning and dialogue facilitate intellectual engineering of every human being. And this can be accomplished only in a peaceful atmosphere. Peacebuilding is, therefore, not only a result of dialogue and learning, but it is also its pre-requisite.

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