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Is the Dialogue between Western and Islamic

Marietta Stepanyants

Russian Academy of Sciences

It might sound strange that I question the possibility of the dialogue between the two civilizations at the time when there is so much talk around about the significance of that dialogue. It is true that the most respectable international organizations, like the UNO, the governments of the states, the prominent public spokesmen everywhere speak about the dialogue between civilizations. Yet, let us be frank to ourselves, little have been achieved to eliminate tension, hostility, aggressiveness. Wars and terrorist actions are increasing in numbers. It is quite legitimate then to ask the above question keeping in mind that we talk about the dialogue in the context of a new world situation-in the times of globalization.

There are certainly those who will answer to the question negatively. Some of them “respond” by actions: launching wars and terrorist attacks. These are those who not only disbelieve in dialogues, but strongly resist the latter due to different reasons (mostly, of quite selfish political and economic reasons). The only way to prevent that dangerous cause of the developments is to oppose it by putting a really strong pressure on behalf of the widest public opinion. And it is here where the role and responsibility of the intellectuals are of the greatest importance.

Unfortunately, even among the enlightened minds there are disbelievers in a possibility and fruitfulness of the dialogue. A few months ago, in June of this year, at the Ninth East-West Philosophers’ Conference in Honolulu one of the most respected and prominent philosophers admitted that he doubted usefulness of intercultural dialogues about which there is so much fuss. Cultural plurality, to his view, will become as useless as differences in currencies since the process of cultural *hybridization* would result eventually in the unification of all cultures in one.

Unanimity does not exist even in the ranks of those, who formally accept the dialogue of cultures. They greatly differ in the understanding of its final purposes. To a few the dialogue should be aimed at the creation of one (their own) civilization dominant on the others by “convincing” the latter in its superiority. Some claim “the European *mission civilizatrice*” which eventually will make the rest of the world to “see the advantage of a democratic way of life”. The others, like Francis Fukuyama, declare “the end of history because there is only one system that will continue to dominate world politics, that of the liberal-democratic West”. He is sure that time is on the side of modernity, and “see no lack of US will to prevail”¹.

The strongest opposition to the above mentioned claims comes from the side of the Muslim world. The resistance comes from many sides: from those who are in power or fight for it, from masses who suffer of social injustice, from religious fanatics, etc. The Muslims not only resist, they often make their own claims for the dominance. In recent years one can notice drastic changes in the mood of Muslim academic community which has been driven in the above mentioned direction. Prominent professor of philosophy (Cairo University) Hassan Hanafi states:

Islam appears as the only savior of the World. It is the foundation of a new world order. It offers a solution of the actual world crisis in the East as well as in the West. Islamic umma is ready for it. It is the best Umma which ever existed on Earth. It is still the guardian of principles and the custodian of universal values. Islam is the final revealed religion, the accomplished prophecy and the perfect model of life¹.

The confrontation between the West and the Muslim world has become so strong that it makes some to lose hopes in fruitfulness of any dialogue. “It seems to me, -admits Richard Rorty, -that the idea of a dialogue with Islam

is pointless. There was no dialogue between the philosophers and the Vatican in the eighteenth century, and there is not going to be one between the mullahs of the Islamic world and the democratic Westⁱⁱⁱ.

I know there are many who are ready to join highly respected American philosopher in his rather desperate conclusion, many, at least, among the intellectuals in my own country. In my view, that desperation results from a number of causes, including insufficient knowledge of a culture, measuring the latter by one's own world-views and moral standards. Heidegger was right by saying that the global encounter or dialogues today are typically not conducted between cultural partners, but rather on the basis of a linguistic and conceptual framework supplied entirely by Western (or European) civilization. He called it the "complete Europeanization \[Westernization\] of the earth and humankind".

It is true that the acknowledgment of a particular logically leads to making borders between that is your own and of the other. Yet, there is nothing wrong in the procedure of such differentiation if it does not end in constructing a border similar to the Berlin wall aimed to exclude any contacts, even more-any interaction between those who stay behind the different sides of the border. In Charles Taylor's words, the accentuation of the borders without the acknowledgment of interconnection is fraught with a danger to stifle in us an ability to respond to the deepest and the strongest human aspirations.^{iv}

Among the frontiers established by people between themselves the most insurmountable and impregnable seem to be those which are building up in minds and hearts, which originate not so much from rational considerations as from a blind belief. The latter is most unshakable when it is a religious belief.

History has demonstrated that too often frontiers were established in order to segregate the adherents of different religious confessions. However, paradoxically that kind of division contradicts the very assignment of religion: to bring man close to God, and consequently, to unite people with each other. Pointing out to this very function of religion, in particular, of a monotheistic creed, an outstanding Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov affirmed: "The unity of God logically demands the unity of humanity"^v.

As a matter of fact, the Holy Scriptures clearly presupposes the unity of humanity: 'Is it not written "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?"' (Mark, 11: 17, see also: Isa, 56: 7). In the same spirit the Koran says: "It is He Who created you from a single person" (VII: 189), and "Mankind was but one nation, but differed (later)" (X: 19).

Nevertheless one might find in the Holy Scriptures a number of passages where it seems that intolerance, enmity and even violence towards the people outside one's own confession are justified.

How can one explain the existence of contradictory statements in the Holy Books? An atheist will easily respond to the question, considering religion to be created by man, and thus to be subjected to human passions, vile motives, rivalry and fight for power.

For a believer there is no way for the Lord to contradict Himself, since God is perfect, He is Absolute. Thus, what looks like contradictions in the Scriptures is explained as resulting from human misunderstanding of the true meaning of the Divine Word.

For centuries those very "contradictions" of the Holy Scriptures have been used for moral justification of hostility and even aggression towards heterodoxies. Intolerance to those behind the frontiers, who are segregated as "the others", is in particularly dangerous when it is sanctified by the Divine authority. Then aggression and violence are presented as actions approved by God being aimed to bring the victory of the Good over the Evil. Thus St. Augustinian warnings are ignored: "Do not fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of you".

Is peaceful coexistence between people of different religious creeds is possible at all? I believe the answer could be positive if there is a wish and a will to give up confrontation and to start dialogue.

At what religious dialogue should be aimed? What one could expect from it? Sometimes dialogue is carried on in anticipation of a synthesis. However the latter is rarely achieved. A certain kind of syncretism might take place only in result of long coexistence and interaction of traditions when they function on the same or at least neighbouring territories. (That is, for example, how Sikh Religion emerged in India).

More often that, what is called synthesis, happens to be in fact something else. For example, there have been efforts to bring Christian-Muslim synthesis in XIX-XX centuries. However economical and political inequality of the Muslim side has excluded a genuine synthesis. Economical superiority of the Christian world prompted presentation of the Christian values as higher and more corresponding to the modern demands than those one of Islam. Hence, "synthesis" has happened to be nothing but a superficial adjustment of the Islamic values to the

Western-Christian. An imposed “synthesis” is in the long run rejected as a forced transplantation of an alien model in the “body” of Muslim culture.

Equally doubtful is effectiveness of ecumenical form of synthesis, in particularly, when it is aimed to unite all religious creeds in a new world faith. That is how synthesis is conceived by the adherents of the Baha’s faith established by Baha’a’llah (1817—1892).

The Bahai community counts about 3 millions inhabiting in all the continents and represents 2100 ethnic groups. The Baha’s faith is for sure cosmopolitan. Its leaders, like Shogi Effendi, consider the process of the formation of sovereign national states has come to the end. The mature word should give up the fetish of national sovereignty and accept the unity of the humanity by establishing the new world order: “The Earth is but one country and mankind its citizens”. Bahai preaching appeals to those who sincerely wish to overcome race, ethnic, class, religious hostility. However it is not clear how that New World Order could be achieved. The Bahai orientation to establish the New Order once and forever, to maintain it by the World State, etc. is fraught with the threat of totalitariness.

There is also another approach to religious dialogue—a mystical one. In this case, the unity of all the religions is searched on the way of the discovery of the perennial core. It is considered that the differences in beliefs, rituals, institutional forms which seem to be important in everyday experience fade away when we see and affirm the timeless and infinite reality that is no longer broken or differentiated into various forms. In the perennial philosophy infinite reality is compared with light: when light passes through a prism, one can see the various shades of blue, yellow, green, and red, however, no one of these colors, which are like the different cultural forms of religion, is light itself.

As there are different levels of reality (terrestrial, intermediate-psychic, celestial and infinite) there are four levels of selfhood: body, mind, soul, and spirit. The developing, ever changing religious traditions have a common core. The differences of ethical claims and the different evaluations of the life expressed in the physical world, psychic experiences, and theological expressions disappear and become one in a limitless, wholly transcendent pure consciousness, or infinite self. The purpose of the dialogue is to bring forth a deeper apprehension of the spirit, the inner identity of all religions.

Mystical approach is used by the advocates of “the perennial philosophy” like Seyid Hossein Nasr, Frithjof Schuon, and Huston Smith. To those who do not share their views, still it would be difficult not to acknowledge that mystical approach could be helpful in carrying on dialogue, in reducing confrontations based on the differences concerning theological, ethical, etc. problems. That might be an explanation why mystical approach is rejected strongly by fanatic fundamentalists, while it is referred to by those who would like to put the end to the communal fights and tension.

In direct contrast to mystical approach stands a dialogue carried on rational grounds by the comparativists who look at confessional differences as complementary alternatives that never could be fully eliminated. The only effective way out then is to concentrate attention on certain notions, categories, trying to grasp the logic of their emergence and formulation (For example, on the understanding of Good and Evil, on life and death, on salvation, on perfection, on salvation, etc.)

None of the participants of the dialogue has a right to claim that the fundamental principle of his/her religion (say, the Divine Trinity of the Christianity, or the finality of Muhammad’s prophesy in Islam) is of the universal value, and consequently should be acknowledged by everybody. Those who are engaged in the dialogue are expected to be ready to look critically at their own religious traditions and their practices, while at the same time to wish to understand the convictions, beliefs of the others.

The comparative dialogue is mostly carried on by academics. It is quite effective though not free from its own shortcomings. It is criticized for being too relativist, for ignoring the transcendental Reality, for rationalization of religious experience which never could be grasped by reason.

Still comparative approach attracts by its orientation on creative understanding of religious cultures as such. It permits to put to other cultures the questions which they never ask from themselves, and by this way to discover some new meanings. Every culture maintains its identity, while “opening” themselves to each other they are mutually enriched.

Any kind of interreligious dialogue could be effective only if it is based on the acknowledgement of the equality of all sides participating in it and on their mutual respect. Neither should anybody claim superiority of his/her belief and on that premise to judge what is right and what is wrong in somebody’s actions. Even if it is not accepted that the law is to be administrated on the secular foundations of the democratic procedures, and one insists on the rule of

the Law of God, it is to be reminded that the most important attributes or names of the Lord has been Just and Merciful. “The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that He has made” (Psalms 145: 8-9). Likewise the opening sura of the Koran says: “...Praise to be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, the Beneficent, the Merciful, Owner of the Day of Judgment...”

The Holy Scriptures prescribe to the believers to follow God’s way by being merciful and avoid violence. In fact, teachings of Christianity and of Islam, for example, consider human life to be sacred being, since it is a Divine gift. The Bible reminds about that saying “If a man is burdened with the blood of another, let him be a fugitive until death, let no one help him” (From the proverbs of Solomon 28: 17) or “He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any more” (Isa 2: 3-4).

One does not find in the Koran the same direct and clear protection of a human life. The critics of Islam would insist on the contrary by referring to the Koran justification of a vengeance: “O ye who believe! The law of equality is prescribed to you in case of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman” (II: 178).^{vi} However this injunction could be understood otherwise. In fact, many of Muslim interpreters insist on a quite different reading of that prescription. The Great Sheikh Ibn Arabi in his “Gems of Wisdom” (*Fusus al-Hikam*) explains Koranic instruction for vengeance as the proof of God’s condemnation of killing as such and His wish to defend humanity from violence by prescribing strong punishment for the latter (chapter 18). In fact, the Koran says: “The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from God; for (God) loveth not those who do wrong” (XLII: 40).

The critics of Islam also refer to the practice of jihad-holy war carried on by the Muslims-as a proof to the aggressive character of Muhammad’s teaching. However one should be really careful with such conclusions.

First, it should be pointed out that the Koran strongly condemns killing of a believer: “If a man kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is hell, to abide therein (for ever): and the wrath and the curse of God are upon him, and a dreadful penalty is prepared for him” (IV: 93). If killing of a believer happens by mistake, it is also condemned and a certain kind of compensation is to be paid to the family of the deceased.

The believers include not only the Muslims but as well the people of all the Scriptures: “Those who believe (in the Koran), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians, -any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, -on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (V: 72).

The Koran warns its adherents not to follow the advices of those who want them to take actions of punishment without proper considerations: “Yet they ask thee to hasten on the Punishment! But God will not fail in His promise. Verily a Day in the sight of thy Lord is like a thousand years of your reckoning” (XXII: 47). God expects from a believer to be restrained and avoid aggression. In fact, jihad is prescribed as a defensive act: “But fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who suppress faith” (II: 191), or “Let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression” (II: 193). All the ayats from the Koran which call for the Holy War would be misinterpreted if they are taken out of the general context of the history of Mohammed and first years of the life of the Muslim community. One is always to remember in what particular historic situation prophet Muhammad made his statements.

In case hostility and fight are inevitable, Koran calls Muslims to follow a set of rules of a warfare concerning prisoners, women and children, elderly people, etc. It is said in a number of ayats: “Fight to the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loves not transgressors” (II: 190). It is quite significant that Islamic teaching prescribes peace-making as an honorable art and duty: “And if they incline to peace, incline thou also to it, and trust in Allah” (VIII: 62).

Among the names or attributes of Allah the most important are Just and Merciful. Hence the Koran too calls the believers: “Be foremost in seeking forgiveness” (57: 21); “Race towards forgiveness from your Lord” (3: 133); “Restrain anger and pardon men” (3: 34); “Forgive, even when angry” (42: 37); “Let evil be rewarded with evil. But he that forgives and seeks reconciliation shall be rewarded by God. He does not love wrongdoers.” (42: 40).

It will not be an exaggeration to affirm that all the religious teachings give preference to achieving victory of the Good over the Evil through non-violent ways. It is true though that the believers instead too often have been resorted to force. In all the times, among all the peoples there have existed the two opposite parties: a party of war and a party of peace. Stressing upon aggressive sides of the historical experience or interpreting the Scriptures as justifications to that aggressiveness we consciously or unconsciously take the side of the parties of war. Would not it be wiser to share with the people like Mahatma Gandhi their believe that non-violence is the law of our species,

while violence is the law of animals, hence the dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law—to the strength of the spirit, that the only hope for the suffering world is the specific and direct way of nonviolence, that “the Allah of Islam is the same as the God of the Christians and the Ishvara of the Hindus. Living faith in this God means equal respect for all religions. It would be the height of intolerance—and intolerance is a species of violence—to believe that your religion is superior to other religions” (“Harijan”, 14 May 1938).

Non-violence might not triumph in the near future. Its progress is extremely slow; the voices of the champions of non-violence may not be heard by many in the tumult and shouting of today. But it will have to be heard and understood some time or other if this world is to survive in any civilized form.

The acknowledgment of a specific, culturally particular might create premises for the respect towards “the other” and hence to promote a dialogue. However, very often it results oppositely in producing antagonistic consequences. That happens when the specific is interpreted not as value neutral but rather as a proof of the superiority of one culture over the other, which has an exclusive possession of the Truth. It is in this very way act so called Islamic fundamentalists, from one side, and those Westerners who are inclined towards arrogant and hostile attitude anything which is associated with Islam.

The understanding of the causes which had brought cultural differences allows eliminate the obstacles on the way to the dialogue. The latter is possible only if the common features are disclosed. The people can not be absolutely different in everything. If they differ in one way, they are definitely the same in the other way. Daya Krishna, a distinguished Indian philosopher, justly points out: “... if philosophy is an enterprise of the human reason, it is bound to show similarities across cultures to some extent and, similarly, as a human enterprise it is bound to be concerned with what man, in a particular culture, regards as *sum mum bonum* for mankind”.^{vii}

Not only abstract confirmation of commonness, but the discovery of concrete forms of its manifestation in two cultures which look as being alien to each other, that is the cultures of the West and of the Muslim world, could prepare new generation, fortunately, less burdened with stereotypes than the older people, to join the dialogue and to carry it successfully.

Here are a few points to which special attention should be given, in my view.

1. There is commonness in the very genesis of the cultures of the West and of the Muslim world.

In the minds of ordinary people as well as in the rhetoric of many politicians the West is exclusively identified with the Christian civilization. Yet, the Western civilization was formed under the impact of a complex set of factors. The most important of them are: the heritage of Greece and Rome, the Judea-Christian legacy, and the culture of “modernity” which in its turn was mostly influenced by the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment.^{viii}

Similarly, the Islamic civilization is an “amalgam” originated from the pre-Islamic legacy, the Islamic traditions, Judea-Christian and ancient Greece influences. To the above mentioned usually accepted components it should be added the impact of Zoroastrianism.

2. The religious constituent of the two civilizations is stamped by a major likeness: Christianity and Islam are monotheistic teachings. The name given to the God is not so much important as the belief that He is the only One.

The first among the five “pillars” (*arkan*) of Islam, which is basically the foundation of the others, is *shahada*. Whoever confesses in public: “I testify that there is no deity save God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God” has accepted Islam. It is worth noting that this very point of likeness between Christianity and Islam was specially emphasized in the Declaration of the Second Vatican Synod “Concerning the Attitude of the Church to Non-Christian Religions”. It says: “The Church respects the Muslims, who worship the One God”.

The second part of the *shahada* is no less significant. In keeping with various Koranic verses, the Muslims accept all the prophets who taught before Muhammad, from Adam through the patriarchs, Moses, and Jesus up to Muhammad—the last messenger (“the seal of the prophecy”). Though Koran does not recognize Jesus’ divine status, yet it refers to him as being “the Nearest to God” (Sura 3, ayat 45) and having an angelic nature.

It is also remarkable that there is single woman’s name mentioned in the Koran. It is Virgin Mary, who is according to Islamic tradition is one of the four best women ever lived on earth.

3. The Christian and Islamic civilizations have known similar phenomena, like atomism, notion of emanation, mysticism, etc.

Those who are engaged in the dialogue are expected to be ready to look critically at their own religious traditions and their practices, while at the same time to wish to understand the convictions, beliefs of the others.

The most preferable is the dialogue carried on as a never ending process, the dialogue which is aimed on continuing development of an openness and sensitivity for respectful understanding the particularity of the others’

position, on communicating one's own value system, or faith, and learning from others for mutual benefit in living in a global community.

There is something more I would like to add in the conclusion. We have today a real chance to answer positively to the question which is put in the title of this paper. There is the perspective which has been opened recently by those changes which take place in the Muslim world and which some call as post-Islamism.

The onset of a "post-Islamist" turn took place after the end of the war between Iran and Iraq (1988), the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (1989), and the launching the programme of post-war reconstruction under president Rafsanjani in Iran. Iran's post-Islamist experience has also contributed to an ideological shift among some Islamist movements (such as the Tunisian Al-Da'wa Islamic Party led by Rashed Channoushi, to the split in the Lebanese Hizbullah, to the emergence of Al-Wasat Party in Egypt as an alternative to both militant Islamists and the Muslim Brothers, to the inclusive policy and practices of Islamic parties in Turkey (Rifah, Virtue, and Justice and Development Parties), to the emergence in Saudi Arabia of an "Islam-liberal" trend. Each displays some diverse versions of post-Islamism.

Post-Islamism is a conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains. As Asef Bayat-the Academic Director of ISIM and the ISIM Chair on Islam and the Modern World at Leiden University, points up: "Yet, post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic, un-Islamic, nor is it secular." Rather it wants to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity, to achieve what some have termed an "alternative modernity"^{ix}.

It is quite unfortunate that these changes are not seen or just ignored by many in the West. To those who has not yet realized the vital need for the dialogue between civilizations and cultures it might be worth to pass the words of the foremost Iranian and Islamic political philosopher and theologian Abdolkarim Soroush:

The world of ideas is a world of dialogue.

Religious knowledge is a variety of human knowledge, subject to change, contraction, and expansion.

Truths everywhere are compatible; no truth clashes with any other truth.

They are all the inhabitants of the same mansion and stars of the same constellation. One truth in one corner of the world has to be harmonious and compatible with all truths elsewhere, or else it is not a truth^x.

References

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- ⁱⁱ Hassan Hanafi. *Islam in the Modern World*. In two volumes. Vol. 2, Cairo, 1995, p.21.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The Future of Religion*. Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp.72-73.
- ^{iv} See: Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p.520.
- ^v *Vladimir Solovyev. Muhammad. St.Petersburg*, 1902, p.28 (in Russian).
- ^{vi} Christian Holy Book is not free of revenge motives as well, though vengeance in it is expected to be administered by God. The Lord is called by a believer to revenge in the most sever way: "Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! For thou dost smite all my enemies on the cheek, thou dost break the teeth of the wicked" (Psalms, 5: 7);"Arise, O Lord, in thy anger, lift thyself up against the fury of my enemies" (7: 6). The same kind of praying on can find in many others psalms.
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- ^x Abdolkarim Soroush. Reason, Freedom & Democracy in Islam. Essential Writings of `Abdolkarim Soroush. Oxford, 2000, pp.13, 16, 21.