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Future Prospects of Muslim-Western Dialogue

Publications of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

-ISESCO- 1440H / 2018A.D.



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Foreword

With this research, I contributed to the Ninth Conference of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in the Arab Republic of Egypt held in Cairo on 13-16 July, 1997, under the theme “**Islam and the West: Past, Present and Future**”. At this Conference, I decided to tackle a topic closely relevant to its theme: “**Prospects of Dialogue between Muslims and the West**”.

So, I was keen to start this topic by linking the past and present because it would be impossible to dissociate them from the future. I gave special attention to analyzing the notion of the West in its broader meanings to be appropriately objective when dealing with the relationship between Islam and the West. Hence, I highlighted how linking Muslims, who are the human bloc who follow the religion of Islam which unites them as the true faith that makes of them one nation, and the West, which is a vast geographical territory settled by peoples of various faiths and different pursuits, lacks in much methodological accuracy and scientific objectivity. I think I have pioneered to highlight this methodological flaw in the reciprocal relationship between Islam and the West. I have no doubt that this flaw is one of the factors conducive to misunderstanding and miscommunication between the two parties.

Therefore, I decided that the issue deserves our research and concluded that the West, regardless of the diversity of its pursuits and backgrounds, looks at us from only one perspective, which is the current situation of the Islamic Ummah, and the material situation of the Islamic world as a whole. I illustrated how our dialogue with

the West will always be tied to our domestic conditions and socio-economic circumstances, as well as to the elements of strength and direct influence we own. Then, I analyzed the impact of the subjective factors on boosting dialogue between Muslims and the West, which is actually a topic scarcely explored by researchers. Accordingly, I showed how the stimulation of subjective factors is highly vital to bolster the will for joint Islamic action to achieve the set objectives. I came to the conclusion that for dialogue between Muslims and the West to succeed, we need not only the will, determination and interest, but also the factors flowing from within and the motivations emanating from the environment and society.

This research was published with the English and French translations in its first edition in 1997 as part of ISESCO's publications. But, in view of the relevance of the issue, and the urgent need for its re-opening for debate, I felt that it would be useful to republish the research to benefit a larger audience.

Allah is the Arbiter of Success.

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Educational, Scientific and Cultural
Organization (ISESCO)**

Introduction

There is a crucial need for a methodological delimitation of the contours of the relationship between the terms making up the title of this paper, namely the future, dialogue, Muslims and the West. Certainly, the future will belong to the international dialogue that rallies all peoples and nations, the comprehensive civilizational dialogue that represents one of the scientific means wielded by humans with a view to setting up fruitful cooperation relations among all people involved in the dialogue.

However, in default of a number of objective conditions, the association of Muslims with the West in a discussion of the future and analysis of the components of dialogue will lack logic and realism.

Muslims are a close-knit nation embracing the Islamic religion and staunchly adhering to its faith, civilization and culture, a nation unified by its commitment to the righteous religion which made of it One Ummah. The attempt to link such a unique nation with the West, which is a concatenation of farreaching geographical entities, inhabited by peoples of different creeds and backgrounds, will obviously lack a great measure of scientific rigour and methodology in view of the contradictions inherent in the attempted linkage, and not allowing for such a link. It does not stand to reason that a group of people embracing the same religion should be brought together in the same context with a number of geographical entities adhering to a plethora of religions, creeds and doctrines at the same time.

Does not the West count in its very heart Muslims of pure Western origin or other? Certainly, when taken together, Muslims in the West represent a minority, but at any rate, they are part and parcel of the

Western societies. Shall we, therefore, put these Muslims aside when we talk about the West or think about initiating a dialogue with it?

Even so, what West do we mean if we adopt the geographical distribution as a criterion? Do we mean Europe and USA, to the exclusion of East Europe and Latin America? And if the Christian West is the addressee and opponent of Muslims, are Muslims the East? If that is so, what about the followers of other revealed or non-revealed religions? But does not the East include also non-Muslims, just as the West includes Muslims.

These subsidiary questions lead to a major question, relating to the specific nature of the West as a whole : Do we mean by West the governments and official institutions, or the peoples, the press, the information and the public opinion reflecting the views of those people? Or is it the universities, research centres, studies and cultural and scientific setups? Or is it rather the parties, organizations and institutions which express the general trends of society? Does this concept of the West include also the Church and its subsidiary institutions? Is it the laic West or the religion-impregnated West? Or do we rather mean the West that involves all these components and elements taken together as the general image of the West?

The attempt to answer these questions in the course of this research would lead to an important conclusion, namely that the West boils down to an integrated civilizational system based on a set of values, principles, ideas, ideologies and policies, a system buzzing with dynamic activity and striving to optimize the yield of its interests and safeguard them using all means and ways.

With this conclusion in mind, we have to fathom the nature of our prospective interlocutor. Likewise, we have to define the philosophy, nature, motives, rationale and goals of this dialogue. But before all

that, we have to know the end of this dialogue, that is to say what we want from this dialogue, whether we seek dialogue for dialogue's sake, or we want a dialogue for the achievement of our own interests? With whom to engage in dialogue? Do governments and official institutions dialogue among themselves, or do the non-governmental organizations, grassroots organizations and society's institutions engage in dialogue.

Or is it the elite of scholars, intellectuals and academicians of Muslim countries that initiates dialogue with its counterparts in the West? Founded on these bases, constructive dialogue is geared, in reality, towards achieving these ends altogether.

Limits and fields of dialogue:

Dialogue, in its own right, is a vital requisite. However, dialogue can only be initiated with the peers, those who are infused with an earnest will to engage in a relationship aimed at achieving specific objectives already agreed upon. In default of these conditions, there can be no dialogue : All we will have is an absurd form of relationship, at best a peremptory dictation of opinion by one party over the other. This is sham dialogue, lacking legitimacy and hollow, filled only with despotism and arrogance, and marked by the policy of the *fait accompli*.

It is on these firm bases that the dialogue of Muslims with the West should be founded. After acquiring these crystal-clear meanings, it should proceed towards the fulfilment of the above-mentioned goals. It should always be kept in mind that the West with which we will engage in dialogue is, in reality, an integrated system of values and principles making up the underlying philosophy of the political, economic and social systems governing the Western countries in the general political sense, rather than in the limited geographical sense.

Yet, this West is the very West that used to harbour a long-standing animosity towards Muslims in the past, occupying our lands for long periods and depleting our wealth. It impaired our interests and wrought havoc in our lands till we waged political, economic and military battles against it, particularly in the Arab-Muslim countries which had been compelled to take arms in their wars of liberation in the face of European occupation. With this background in mind, we cannot help recollecting their moving scenes when dealing with the West.

However, we exert strenuous efforts to overcome them in order to ward off their adverse effects, with a strong will to build new relations with the West on the basis of renewed confidence, emphasizing, now and then, our resolve to enter a new phase of understanding, coexistence and cooperation.

A clear testimony to our forgetting of the fall-outs of the past is our current receptiveness to dialogue with the West and our eagerness to consolidate it, strengthen its role in enriching international relations and promoting contacts among peoples and nations. But in contrast, has the West vanquished its own historical prejudices? Has it overcome what can be called, without embarrassment, the accumulated complexes? Has the West ridden itself of the ideas and theories coined about Muslims by dint of its previous practices amidst the Arab-Muslim countries?

At any rate Muslims underline, today, their resolve to transcend the fall-outs and experiences of the past and rise up to the level of the requirements and challenges of the 21st Century.

Perhaps our mooted topic of dialogue with the West with such keen seriousness and interest is a cogent evidence of the Muslims' transcending of these matters in spite of their insidious workings in the minds and hearts.

Departing from these bases and spirit of serene tolerance and peace, we underline that dialogue with the West has become, today, a necessity, indeed a binding duty.

Dialogue has to be governed, though, by a set of precise rules, to be agreed upon by firm conviction. They are :

First: Dialogue must be equitable, fulfilling the conditions of equality and mutual will, and taking place on diverse levels and degrees in such a way as to be comprehensive, involving the various strata and castes, on governmental level as well as on the level of non-governmental institutions interested in the issues and fields determined for this dialogue.

Second: Dialogue must address all issues and causes of the Arab-Muslim society, with the exception of the matters falling under the sovereignty of Arab-Muslim countries. The field and course of dialogue will, therefore, be extended and deepened to involve any topic related to cultural, economic and social life or to science and technology, instead of being restricted to pure cognitive issues.

Third: Dialogue must seek to achieve the mutual goals of both parties, guaranteeing their interests relating to progress in all walks of life, on the cultural, scientific, economic and social levels. It must have a positive impact on all relations between Muslims and the West to the best interest of all.

Fourth: Dialogue must be civilized, going beyond the controversial issues which are the object of permanent discord that can only be lifted with the relinquishing, by one of the other party, of one of its sacred values. The highly sensitive issues have to be avoided because, when raised, they are likely to hamstring dialogue, or reverse its positive effects.

Fifth: Dialogue must proceed along parallel lines, in accordance with pre-established programmes. It must not stop in a given direction pending the appearance of results of the dialogue taking place in a second direction. Rather, the components of dialogue and its directions have to intertwine closely in such a way as to achieve the targeted objectives altogether.

One of the conditions of success in the achievement of the said objectives is to draw up plans for dialogue before engaging in it. It is therefore inevitable to involve the relevant institutions and organizations operating in the field of Arab-Islamic cultural and intellectual action through its official channels in order to enable these bodies to monitor the general courses of dialogue and direct them towards the goals set forth. Such planning requires coordination of the efforts exerted by actors in this field, on the one hand, and the Western parties involved in the dialogue, on the other.

It should be made sufficiently clear that dialogue with academic and cultural bodies on issues of great importance on the cognitive level will always remain the main passageway to general dialogue on topics of a comprehensive nature. Efforts need not be focused on dialogue of a religious nature although religious dialogue may be one of the bases of the coexistence and understanding that could pave the way for cooperation in many fields.

Current situation of dialogue with the West:

Over one quarter of a century has elapsed after the start of dialogue between Muslims and the West in its novel formula on the religious and political levels, called “Islamic-Christian Dialogue” and “Arab-European dialogue”. What are the benefits of such dialogue for Arabs and Muslims? What did the West itself, which called for this dialogue benefit from this dialogue?

Before attempting to answer this question, which we consider to be one of the topical questions in the course of this research, it is advisable to start with an essential question which must be answered if we want to tackle the theme of this paper accurately.

The question is: Why did the invitation to dialogue emanate from the West, and not from the Muslims although the latter's religion and ethics call for tolerance and peaceful life?

What are the motives behind the initiative taken by certain Western institutions to invite some circles in the Muslim societies to enter into dialogue?

What are the reasons which generated the idea of Islamic - Christian dialogue first, then the idea of Arab-European dialogue afterwards?

Everybody knows that the political climate which prevailed throughout the world, in general, and in the Middle-East, in particular, in the aftermath of the War of June of 1967, was the main reason behind the emergence of the idea of Arab-European Dialogue. Dialogue between Muslims and the West has made much headway on this political level, then it stopped.

It was then resumed for a short while on the morrow of the Ramadan War of 1973 and definitively halted.

The resumption of the Arab-European dialogue policy in the aftermath of the Ramadan War was ascribed to the rise of oil prices, on the one hand, and the emergence of Arabs as an influential power in international economics as a result of the stance adopted by the oil-producing Arab countries during the war, on the other.

In contrast, the reasons which led the West, in particular the Western Church, to announce the idea of dialogue with Muslims are not sufficiently clear.

The first remark which jumps to mind is the fact that the idea of Dialogue with the West has unfolded in the church,

which gave dialogue a religious tinge. Hence the appearance of what has been called for a third of a century the “Islamic-Christian Dialogue”. As a result, whenever there is a mention of dialogue with the West, it is “Islamic-Christian Dialogue” which jumps to mind to the extent that it has come to stand as a symbol of the dialogue of Muslims and the West.

The Islamic-Christian dialogue has a historical background which needs to be briefly reviewed. For the first time in the history of the Western Church, the Second Vatican Foundation (1962-1965) discussed the relationship between the Church and the non-Christian religions from the points of view of faith and doctrine. A special declaration called “*mostra aetate*” was released on the relationship between the church and the non-Christian religions. This foundation has attached special importance to Islam. For the first time in the fourteen centuries of the existence of Christianity side by side with Islam, a catholic ecumenical foundation has spoken positively about Islam, recognizing its distinct religious status⁽¹⁾. Since then, many developments occurred in the relation between Islam and Christianity, foremost of them is the speech delivered by Pope Paul VI in Amman and Al-Quds in 1964, in which he addressed a brotherly greeting to the Muslims, inviting the Ecumenical Church to pay special respect to the followers of monotheist religions, who worship the one real God⁽²⁾. In May 1964, Pope Paul VI announced

(1) *Islam and Christianity*, Alexis Jurawski. Translated by Dr. Khalaf Muhammed, Al-Jarrad, revised and prefaced par Dr. Mahmud Hamdi Zaquzuq, “Alam, Al-Ma’arifa series”, Issue 215, Nov. 1996, p. 137.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 140.

the creation of a secretariat for non-Christian religious affairs, which would subsequently assume the function of running the affairs of dialogue with Muslims. In August of the same year, Pope Paul VI addressed an *Ecclesiam Suam*, i.e. a comprehensive church message, which emphasized the necessity of initiating dialogue with all the faithful and those infused with sincere will with a view to establishing new relations between the church and the other religions existing in the world.

The message stressed the need to achieve rapprochement and dialogue with the Muslims in particular⁽¹⁾.

Although we cannot venture to make hasty forecasts about the future of Islamic-Christian relations because a mere quarter of a century of courteous dialogue cannot compare with fourteen centuries of religious dispute and discord, it must be granted that the initiatives taken by the church following that of the Second Vatican Foundation show that the call for dialogue with the Islamic religion is not, as indeed upheld by a specialized researcher in this issue, a politico-theological manoeuvre dictated by temporary, circumstantial interests, but rather an integrated line of action on the long-term⁽²⁾.

In this connection, the Muslim researchers engrossed in the analysis of the dimensions of this issue is entitled to wonder about the long-term objectives of this integrated line of action designed by the Western Church for dialogue with Muslims.

If the idea of Islamic-Christian dialogue has unfolded in such a climate infused with the spirit of receptiveness and desire of rapprochement with the followers of the revealed religions, or according to the

(1) *Ibid.*, p. 140.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Vatican's expression: "The non-Christian religions", what is the goal behind the emergence of this idea at origin? At any rate, being well-intentioned and inclined to deal with reality as it is, we, as Muslims, accept to be party of this type of dialogue even though it has not been in our opinion satisfactory in the way that we want. Some of the express stances of the Vatican Church⁽¹⁾ vis-à-vis some of the issues related to the life of Arabs and Muslims lack, indeed, the spirit of equity, justice and objectivity when viewed through the prism of human principles, justice and international law, such as its position vis-à-vis the cause of Al-Quds Al-Sharif, which contradicts, in essence, the Arab-Islamic stance expressed in the resolutions of the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, in addition to its position with regard to the fierce war waged against Bosnia-Herzegovina, a position lacking resolve when it could have been more bold and equitable.

Up to now, about thirty rounds of the Islamic-Christian dialogue have been held in several capitals, taking the form of conferences, symposia, seminars and joint meetings, during which important issues were discussed, issues chosen mainly by the Christian side. Yet, the result reached by these rounds are not as valuable and important as we expect from a dialogue of Muslims with the Christian West.

A realistic analysis of the dialogue of Muslims with the Christian West will certainly dissuade us from aspiring to a perfect convergence of views on issues discussed by both parties during the dialogue. Even if it may occur in political matters through bilateral talks among governmental parties, this perfect convergence cannot possibly take place in cultural and intellectual issues.

(1) By Western Church, we mean the Vatican in order not to confuse it with the Eastern Church, some of whose followers are citizens of some Arab-Muslim countries.

This is only natural since each party adheres to its own faith, philosophy and perception of things. Nevertheless, we hope that dialogue with the West will evolve in terms of style, method and philosophy, not to tally perfectly with what we want ourselves, but to tally, in the first place, with the new spirit prevailing in the world today, with the principles of international legitimacy based on the resolutions of the United Nations, so that dialogue may become an efficient means for building new foundations of international relations.

If the insignificant impact of the Islamic-Christian dialogue is far below the hopes pinned on it, the Arab-European dialogue in its broad politico-economic framework has not achieved to date any one of the objectives set for it. Is, therefore, the idea of dialogue a barren one? Or does the idea itself need to be developed to keep abreast of the spirit of the modern epoch? Or is the reason behind this weakness and failure ascribed to the lack of the main requisites of any dialogue, namely the equality of parties of dialogue?

At any rate, the dialogue between Muslims and the West, whether at religious, political or economic level, is badly in need of a self-evaluation conducted on the bases, principles, objectives, ways and means at the same time. A minute, comprehensive assessment has to take place, analysing results and data, in order to finally redress the aspects calling for correction.

Impact of internal factors on the consolidation of dialogue:

Considering the meagre yield of dialogue with the West, it can be fairly said that this dialogue has not yet gone beyond the starting point, not to say that it has failed. However, we have to be courageous enough to recognize that one of the reasons of the deadlock of dialogue

is our own weakness, the dispersion of our efforts and the scant coordination of the actions we undertake in this connection. Add to this the climate of internecine conflict prevailing in the Islamic World as a result of the ebb of Islamic solidarity and its failure to achieve its noble goals, namely to cement the ranks of the entire Muslim Ummah, strengthen its identity and inject in Muslims the power and ability to affirm their presence on the international scene. The reason for our weakness lies in our failure to fulfill the requirements of Islamic solidarity with all its dimensions and goals. But the more we buttress the internal edifice of the entire Islamic world, join ranks, coordinate efforts, achieve mutual interests and respect one another in the ethical, political and constitutional sense of respect, the more cohesive we will grow because we will then have the components of self-assertion, not self-imposing, in order to convince all parties that we are a wise nation which knows its course, controls its fate and is master of the means likely to help it achieve its goals.

Should these requirements be fulfilled, the West will change the position it adopts vis-à-vis its dialogue with us as Muslims.

It will change its outlook on us and will reckon with us in the way we deserve before engaging in dialogue on whichever level.

No matter how diverse its backgrounds and trends may be, the West looks at us yet from a unidimensional perspective, based on our current situation as a Muslim Ummah and our material status as an Islamic world. This perception is admittedly reflected in the way the West deals with us on all levels.

To be honest and true to ourselves, we have to concede that the general situation of the Islamic world at present does not suggest that we are a powerful nation on a par with the other nations although we aspire to reach such a status through the worthy efforts exerted to achieve the progress of the Islamic world and its prosperity in various fields.

The activation of internal factors is vital as it provides the driving force for proceeding towards the attainment of the goals set forth. From this perspective, before engaging in the dialogue of Muslims with the West, we must ascertain not only the existence of will and interest but also the motivation emanating from the self and the incentive factors proceeding from the environment and society at large. The future of our dialogue with the West is, therefore, contingent upon the real progress that we will have achieved in the political, economic, cultural and intellectual domains.

Given the above, our dialogue with the West will always remain closely linked to our internal conditions and our political and economic situation; it will depend on the extent of our material power and direct influence. However, this does not mean that we will have to put an end to the efforts we are exerting with a view to laying down the bridges of rapprochement and intercourse with the West, and wait till we meet the standard of progress which entitles us to be peer of the West. Rather, this means that we should strive to pool our efforts in a complementary way and coordinate our positions in a way to proceed along parallel lines towards the targets we set for ourselves.

We must endeavour now and then to convince the West that we deserve to enter into dialogue with it on all levels and that we are a nation upholding full coexistence and cooperation with all nations and peoples on the premise that coexistence, cooperation and tolerance are qualities deep-rooted in our principles and the immutable values marking our civilization.

We think that the adoption of this forward-looking approach is likely to lead to the development, enrichment and consolidation of dialogue with the West in a way to raise it to such standards as would achieve our interests and safeguard our sovereignty, civilizational identity and intellectual independence, which cannot be dissolved into the

cultures not consistent with our civilization and identity, but does not indulge for that matter into isolation or ostracism, for it is an act of planned receptiveness and interaction with others on sturdy bases and in accordance with firm principles.

Dialogue with the West cannot remain restricted to one domain, but should extend to broader vistas. Dialogue has to move to universities and research centres. We should contribute to setting up chairs of Islamic studies in the ancient Western universities, in addition to laying bridges of cooperation between our universities and the Western ones, exchanging experiences, know-how and findings of academic research in various branches of science and knowledge, and establishing sturdy foundations for this cooperation. This is one type of cooperation which must be optimized. We should also enable our information institutions to cooperate with their Western counterparts in accordance with professional standards and allow our businessmen to invest in the Western information field. Additional cultural centres must be set up in the West to serve as channels for our dialogue with the relevant parties. All these means would be efficient and influential in our dialogue with the West, provided that these efforts keep abreast of other efforts in the political and economic fields so that our efforts be integrated and our dialogue with the West be fruitful.