

Understanding The Interfaith Dialogue Under The Prophet Of Islam

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Interfaith dialogue as initiated by the Prophet of Islam is the most interesting subject developed by the scholars of Sirah writing, both Muslims and Non-Muslims in the contemporary world. Islam negated any idea of forced Islamization. The noble Quran tried its best to convince Muslims to propagate the religion through the peaceful means only and provided so much scope to interfaith understanding and dialogue. The most glaring examples are the *hifl al-fuzul*, the constitution of Medina implemented by the Prophet, Prophetic dealings with the delegations with Christians of Najran. This paper will highlight some of the features of these historic events and explain the Quranic narrative in this regard.

Key Words: *Interfaith Dialogue, Hifl al-Fudul, Constitution of Medina, Najranite Delegation.*

In Islamic traditions there are several examples which give a clear idea that Islam has set some basic principles regarding the humanistic approach towards the Non-Muslims; like commonality of Bani Adam, human dignity and equality, kindness and fair treatment, applying justice, no forced Islamisation. The Prophet of Islam lived an exemplary life laying the foundations of interfaith dialogue forever. The *hifl al-fudul* accord, the Constitution of Madinah and the Prophetic dealings with the Christians of Najran are significant examples in this regard.

Hifl al-Fudul Accord

The Accord had come about when a visiting merchant, with no relatives in Mecca to whom he may turn for help, was defrauded by a Meccan merchant namely 'Aas bin Wail Sahmi. The victim, a Yemeni from the tribe of Zubayd, made a public appeal from the slopes of Abu Qubays, the hill near the Kabah. Abdullah bin Jud'ān, the chief of the clan of Taym accordingly called for an accord of chivalry among the Meccans. Zubayr bin Abdul Muttalib, chief of the Hashim clan, brought the young Muhammad of 20 years to take part in the Accord. Those who took part poured

water over the Black Stone, drank it, and then, with their right hands raised above their heads, made an oath to defend those in need irrespective of clan affiliation. This accord was called the hilf al-fudul.

Due to this pact, the Meccan merchant who had wronged the Yemeni merchant was compelled to make amends. Later, the Prophet said: “I was present in the house of Abdullah bin Jud‘ān, at so excellent an accord that I would not exchange my part in it for a herd of red camels; and if now, in Islam, I were summoned to it again in Islam I would gladly respond”. Abu Bakr also took part in this Accord.

Religiosity of Accord

The historic accord has many aspects those are thoroughly discussed by scholars due to its contemporary relevance. The dissolution of Arab tribalism, cutting the blood ties off, pledging to help the wronged, standing against the injustice and supporting the victims are some of the key highlights of this accord. A young authoritative Islamic Scholar Dr. Muhammad Razi ul Islam Nadwi had fully discussed the accord in his article titled “Hilf al-Fudul-Asri M’anawiyat” (Contemporary relevance of the Hilf al-Fudul Accord) published in the quarterly Tahqeeqaat-e-Islami. Prof, Obaidullah Fahad with reference of Dr. Nadwi’s article writes:

“Dr. Nadwi in the preamble of the article while having traced the roots of Arabian social security system in the tribal traditions, has quoted Durayd Ibn al-Simmah (d. 8 AH/630 AD), a pre-Islamic poet in his favour. The poet has proudly claimed the ever-right position of his tribe Ghaziyah and to follow it whole heartedly in all the rights and wrongs. In this exclusive culture of tribalism, an accord on the basis of humanity and ethical values cutting all the blood ties off and pledging to help the helpless and support the victims was an unusual event and the most respectable, most benevolent and most noble one .

The contemporary relevance of the accord, chiefly in pluralistic perspective, is examined by Dr. Nadwi. He interprets some of the traditions of the Prophet to support his argument that the accord to the effect of the Hilf al-Fudul was in full consonance with the teachings of Islam and was therefore fully justified in the modern pluralistic world.

Musnad Ahmad has Quoted a narration that pronounced:

“And fulfill the agreement made in pre-Islamic period, since Islam does nothing but strengthens it; do not make afresh any such agreement in Islam”.

This tradition does not prohibit to enact any such agreement like *Hilf al-Fudul* in the societies wherein Islam is not in a dominant position. To ensure justice and due share in the society such agreements with the followers of different classes, cultures and religions may be materialized. This will help to check the violations and to promote the betterment of the society and further the common ethical values. The cooperation with other religions and cultures in a plural society in the issues common to all is permissible in Islam. The holy Quran provides a directive principle in this regard:

*Help you one another
In righteousness and piety,
But help you not one another
In sin and rancor:
Fear God: for God
Is restrict in punishment.*

Relevance of Accord

Some modern Muslim thinkers have theorized the power-sharing process and cooperation in a plural society in Islamic perspective. This sharing is based on an important foundation of Ummah so as to prevent the evils of dictatorship and to achieve a national or humanistic interest such as independence, development, social solidarity, civil liberties, human rights, political pluralism, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, or liberty of the mosques and Islamic activities.

Dr. Fazlur Rahman Faridi, a noted Islamist scholar in India, has discussed in detail the historical covenant of *Hilf al-Fudul* as probably the first account in the Muslim world on pluralism and diversity. His book *Living as a Muslim in a Plural society* is the first full-fledged discussion that theorizes Islamically the pluralism and finds so scope in the life and teachings of the holy Prophet (peace be upon him). To him:

“the Prophet in this accord was a partner who agreed upon within a plural society, even before the prophethood was conferred on him. It was an agreement to fight together against evil and injustice, a concerted endeavor in which the polytheists, the atheists, and believers in the unity of Allah all joined. The Prophet set great value to this agreement and is reported to have asserted that whenever a similar agreement is effected again he will readily join it.

Extending a helping hand in this kind of endeavor, says Dr. Faridi, is the

minimum moral obligation of a Muslim. It is not desirable to make one's participation subject to the condition that such an endeavor should be comprehensive and all-pervasive or should address the basic ill of the society, the learned scholar clarifies the ideological misperceptions in which the Islamic movements had been involved since last fifty years. To him, even small and modest endeavors deserve our willing and active cooperation as demonstrated by the Prophet's illustrious examples. The small incident of Abu Jahl's refusal to pay the bediun the price of his camel, did not prevent the Prophet (peace be upon him) to go to his rescue.

Constitution of Madinah

Prophet of Islam had migrated from Makkah to Madinah in 622A.D. when to stay there become impossible. After arriving the Madinah, the Messenger of God in the very first year had a deed drawn up in which there was a detailed discussion of the prerogatives and obligations of the ruler and the subjects as well as of other immediate requirements (including a sort of social insurance for the needy). Fortunately, the whole of this document, word for word, has been reproduced by Ibn Ishaq and Abu Ubaid in their respective books.

This document has two distinct parts. In the first part, there are twenty-three clauses, some of them subdivided into two by the signs of a and b. The second part runs between clauses 24 and 47. But it has to be thrice subdivided into sub-clauses. The first 23 clauses concerned with the Makkah refugees and the madinite helpers; and the rest of them discuss the rights and obligations of Jewish tribes of Medina. In both parts one sentence has been reiterated, to the effect that the final court of appeal will be the Noble Prophet himself. There is no difficulty in understanding this position in so far as the Muslims are concerned; but it is not quite so easy for one to understand how the non-believing sections of the population could agree to invest a newcomer and a stranger at that time with so much authority within a few weeks of his arrival. While analyzing Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah says:

“The Jews were divided into two sections rival to each other; it was not possible to them to live in mutual friendship or to feel safe and secure in their independent isolation. Cut off from all sides, they had become friendless and a prey to any and every strong invader. Circumstances such as these obliged them to seek the protective co-operation of the Holy Prophet while retaining the religious freedom as well as internal autonomy”.

Relations with the Jews

Clauses of this document concerning the Jews have meanings and lessons for the interfaith dialogue and are discussed below.

The first section of this part is common for both Muslims and Jews in the event of war, if Muslims and Jews entered into an agreement of conjoint action, each party should bear its own expenses of war. This provision has not only been set forth in clause 24, but has also been repeated in para 37 and 38. The text literally translated will read: “for each party its share on the side which faces it”. Dr. Hamidullah has commented on this provision in the following words:

“When they were responsible for the expenses, it is evident that they had also the right to get a share of the booty, as has been clearly narrated by Abu Ubaid in his comment”.

In clause 25 of the document, it has clearly mentioned that the Jews following their own faith and Muslims following theirs. But in the time of war, in clauses 37,44 and 45, it has been made quite clear that they shall have to fight against all those people against whom the Muslims will have to fight; and shall be in peace with whosoever the Muslims may be in peace, and shall take an equal part in the defense of Medina; and that the Jews shall help Muslims, were these latter attacked by anyone; and similarly the Muslims shall help the Jews if these latter were attacked by anyone. Dr. Hamidullah while analyzing these sections of the document claims:

“The Prophet did not at all interfere in the social and internal affairs of his subjects. Institutions like ransom, blood-money, asylum or quarter, naturalization (membership of a tribe by treaty agreement) and other customs were left untouched (see clauses 25, 31 and 40). The result of this wise political step was that no one felt the least hesitation or embarrassment; and the Jews gladly agreed that the Prophet should discharge the functions of the final court of appeal, even for themselves. From the record of precedents, it appears in the case of the Jews, the Prophet used to give judgement according to their personal, Biblical law”.

Pacts with the Christians of Najrān

Najrān is a large area of southern Arabia in Yemen. At the time of the persecutions of the emperor Justinian (reigned 527-565) against the heretics in the empire, a considerable number of monophysite Christians took refuge in Najrān. In the year of delegation (9 A.H.) or near to it, the Prophet

sent a letter to the bishop of Najrān. The letter was as reads hereunder:

“From Muhammad to the bishop of Najrān: With the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! Whereas I call you away from the worship of cratures to the worship of Allah, and I call you away from the alliance of the creatures to the alliance with Allah. If then you refuse, it will be capitation; and if you refuse capitation also, I shall declare war against you. Greetings!”

The Christians from Najrān decided to visit Medina after receiving the letter from Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) in order to figure out the situation and seek clearance regarding some religious issues. They sent a delegation of sixty members to Madinah.

After arriving Medina, the Christians went to see the Prophet in the mosque, late in the afternoon: they afterwards wanted to celebrate their own prayer, for which the Prophet left the mosque to them. Later on long discussions ensued, naturally on the Christian religion and Islamic religion. It is not known why, but the Jews also participated, and the discussion turned into a quarrel between Christians and Jews. The Prophet received at that time the revelation of more than eighty verses of the third Surah of the Quran. The Quranic statement ends with the ultimatum:

“So whoever disputes with you concerning it after the knowledge that has come to you, you just have to say: ‘Come, let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, our own selves and yourselves: and let us execrate the liars by invoking upon them the curse of Allah! This is the true story indeed. And there is no god but Allah: and, indeed, it is Allah, Who is powerful, wise. If then they turn back ... well, Allah knows the well the doers of mischief! Say: O people of the Book, come to a saying which should be common to us and to you: that we shall worship Allah, without associating anything with Him, and that none of us shall take any one from amongst us as Lords other than Allah’ Then if they turn back, well, say: Bear witness that we are indeed those who surrender (to Allah)”.

Summary of the treaty with the Najranites:

“With the name of Allah the Most Merciful, the All-Merciful.

“Here is what the Prophet Muhammad has prescribed for the inhabitants of Najran, on whom he had authority, concerning every (harvest of) fruits,

every yellow or white (money), every slave. Now, he was generous to them by giving up everything to them against 2000 garments of one ounce of which one thousand are to be delivered in every month of Rajab, and one thousand in every month of Safar, with (in addition to this) one ounce of silver per garment.

“The protection of Allah and the guarantee of the Prophet Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah extend over Najran and its dependencies, concerning their property, their persons, their practice of the cult, the absent and the present among them, their families, their sanctuaries, and all that is in their possession, whether little or much. No bishop will be removed from his episcopal, no monk from his monastery, no priest from his vicarage. No interest on the loans will be loaded on them, nor the blood of pre-Islamic days. They will neither be mobilized for military service, nor subjected to tithe. No troop will tread on their soil. And when someone claims a fight against them, justice will be done to them. Neither they will be opposed nor oppressed. And whoever among them practices usury in the future will be removed from my protection. No man from among them will be made responsible for the fault of another one”.

Such having been the treatment, let us not be astonished with the consequences, reported by ibn Sa’d: the delegation of Najran returned back to its country after having concluded the treaty of peace with the Prophet, but their sayyid and ‘āqib (bishop and vicar) did not wait long before coming again to Medina, and declaring to the Prophet their conversion to Islam. The Prophet gave them sumptuous hospitality and lodged them in the very house of Abu Aiyub al-Ansari where he himself had resided on his arrival in Medina.

These models provided by the Prophet of Islam clearly signify the inter-faith dialogue as the sound bases for communal harmony in the society. These models encourage Muslims to try to understand other religions and cultures and trace out common grounds for mutual co-operation in all the developmental activities.

Notes and References

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