

Intra and Interfaith Dialogue and Peace Building A Muslim Personal Story

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Abstract

The word dialogue comes from the Greek word 'dialogos' and is commonly used in the meaning of conversation between two people, two groups and/or communities or organizations. Dialogue is not a debate to win or lose or to convince the other of a particular way of thinking. Dialogue is communicative conversation that involves intensely creative process with a goal to create peaceful and respectful relations among participants and in a community. When religious communities or organizations nominate a representative to participate in the intra or interfaith dialogue, they make sure that their nominees are trained in the art of dialogue. First, that he/she represents the community and second, that if he/she is not trained in the art of dialogue they understand that there may be a negative impact on the intra-faith or interfaith dialogue. For a healthy intra-faith and interfaith dialogue, the organization or community representatives must be trained in rights, responsibilities and skills of dialogue. This paper will discuss some of those rights, responsibilities and skills essential for a successful dialogue in the light of those principles and guidelines initiated in the Qur'an and Sunnah. It is believed that intra-faith dialogue is more difficult than interfaith dialogue. It has been observed that many Muslim organizations are ready to participate in interfaith dialogue but they hesitate to take part in intra-faith or intra-Muslim dialogue. Intra-faith dialogue is prerequisite to a successful interfaith dialogue. The art of both intra-faith and interfaith dialogue is joined at the hip and the rights, responsibilities and the skills that are essential for interfaith dialogue equally applies to intra-faith dialogue. However this paper will make special references to Muslim history to high light some principles and guidelines that may help Muslims in particular to build a healthy intra-Muslim dialogue.

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To develop a healthy intra-Muslim dialogue, this paper will pick up some religious terminologies like Bid'ah, Shirk, Munafiq, Shaytan or Iblis, Kufir, Dal and Mudil that are commonly used in Muslim sittings against one or another Muslim group. The application of these terminologies and their impact on a healthy intra-Muslim dialogue will be analyzed in the light of the guiding principles in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Keywords: Dialogue; Peace; Muslim; Human Rights.



Introduction

Once in late 1960's, a controversy erupted in the writer's village in Pakistan over a congregational worship that was led by a member of Jama`at-i-Islami, the Imam (religious leader) asked the congregants to repeat the Salat (worship) for the person who led the Salat was Mudil (led astray). This writer was in high school and could not understand what was going on. But soon was exposed to the intra religious rivalry in Pakistan. The writer remembers those days in the summer of 1970 that when two top leaders of Jami`at al `Ulama –e-Islam, Mawlana Hazarvi and Mawlana Mufti Mahmood came to the village and Mawlana Hazarvi used an a harsh and abusive language against Jama`at-i-Islami and called as Dal and Mudil (those who are astray and lead other astray too). Both the religio-political parties are from Deoband School of thought in India but differ on some interpretations of Islamic traditions.

During the writer's undergraduate studies, another controversy exploded over how to say the Fatiha (the opening chapter of the Qur'an) correctly especially the letter "dad" and another one over whether to say "Ameen" loudly after the Imam in worship or in heart. This writer remembers those days where in Bannu some would not pray behind others over how to say the alphabet "dad" correctly when recited in worship. The writers also remember those debates that happened between the Ahl al Hadith (people who claim that Hadith is the ultimate criterion to be followed) and between the `Ulama (scholars) of the Hanafi School of Thought (people who claim that legal schools shall be followed) and some of those dialogue resulted in bloodshed.

This writer also remember those days in Pakistan during his graduate studies that some of our teachers would not hesitate to call the Shi`a as Kafirs (disbelievers). People celebrate their new year, but in Pakistan new meant riots and violence between the Sunni and the Shi`a communities. Police was put on high alert to prevent violence and bloodshed over `Ashura (the 10th day of Muharram on which Imam Hussein was martyred) between the Sunni and the Shi`a.

The last thing in Pakistan that was shocking to this writer was when he became a lecturer in Islamia College and became a dormitory supervisor called the "Tribal hostel" in 1975. One night we arranged a religious talk on the life of the Prophet followed by a dinner. The College principal and some other professors were invited too. When the guests were to leave, our hostel was surrounded by hundreds of students. We found that there was

hard exchange of words between two groups, and one group leader used abusive words against the leaders of the other and then ran away and took shelter in our hostel. The Principal, other professor and myself went to request the students that he has taken our refuge so please leave. The group insisted on his killing, nothing less. We told them to forgive and he will apologize, but were insisting on his killing. The Principal had to call the police to disperse them.

The writer's journey to America in 1976 for higher education at Temple University, Philadelphia opened a new chapter in his life. The first thing was to observe how students dialogue in the classroom with the teachers and between themselves. Sometime there would be heated discussion, but none will lose patience and respect. Muslim students mostly would stay silent in the class. Once a professor took this writer to a corner and asked, why Muslim students remain silent and whenever anyone would raise a question would become red and would look like fighting or under a heavy load? He did not know that many of us come from institutions where dialogue is considered as disrespectful. The teacher may be wrong, but would be hard for students to correct him/her in fear of retribution. He did not know that Muslim students were trained in *Sami`na wa Ata`na* (we hear and obey).

Another occasion that hit the writer on his head was attending a demonstration at Temple University over a budget cut from the state to the University. There were thousands of students standing and shouting at an open ground in front of the main library of the University. Two of us were Muslim standing there and both of us thought that the angry crowd would burn the library to ashes today. It was astounding to see that after hours of shouting the leadership resolved to write letters to the State Assembly members and a delegation would take that to Pittsburgh, the State capital. If this had happened in Pakistan in front of the library or any other building would have been destroyed.

The writer attended ecumenical conference in New York City in 1998. It was surprising to observe how different Christian denomination dialogued with one another. Many of these different denominations called one another as infidels or Kafirs. Their relations were hard and divisive through the centuries after Renaissance and Reformation period. Their leadership had realized their mistake and thus started with ecumenical (meaning Christian household) dialogue. It was surprising to see that they

differed sharply over issues of theologies and rituals, but there was respect and dignity in their argument.

The writer happened to work then in the ecumenical library of the Religion Department under the supervision of Professor Swidler and went through many articles and essays on dialogue. The next two-year of his stay at Temple University was very experiential and made him committed to work for intra-Muslim dialogue. It was the time that Imam Khomeini had succeeded to bring a revolution in Iran. There were new hopes of Muslim unity and that made the writer to join the movement of *La Sharqiya wa la Gharbiyah illa Islamiyyah* (No East, no West, but Islam), looking for unity of Muslims beyond color, ethnic or religious dispute. The writer's Ph.D. thesis could be read under this influence, looking for creating an Islamic State that could finally lead to a sort of confederation of Muslim States.

Looking to the strength of America through dialogue and a peaceful coexistence, many Muslim students including this writer were impressed and wished to create such atmosphere in their own homeland. It was with this commitment that the writer left for Pakistan soon after his successful defense of Ph.D. thesis and did not wait for the award of degree. Before leaving Professor Barrett of the Religion Department over a farewell dinner at his home for this writer and his family asked the writer's wife to stop her husband going back to Pakistan and that he would repent.

Soon after return in 1983, one day in Islamabad after praying Maghrib (Sunset) prayer in the "Red Mosque", there were two flyers hanging at the side of the door that caught the eyes: one from Sipah-e-Sahaba (the soldiers of the Companions of the Prophet, a movement that was founded by a Sunni group to protect the dignity of the companions of the Prophet) and another one from Sipah Muhammad (the soldiers of Prophet Muhammad, a movement that was founded by a Shi'a group to protect the honor of the Prophet). This was pretty scary. These two movements are banned today, but it damaged the Sunni and Shi'a relations enormously.

The writer participated in the Shi'a Sunni Ittihad (unity) movement on Peshawar University Campus and build relations with some religious scholars and academics to bridge the gap, but the gap was widening. It was during this time that a lot of sectarian literature was produced and openly distributed in the country. It was during this time that literature as Shi'a are Kafir was openly circulated everywhere. The writer also took some interfaith initiative by

building relations with some people of other faiths and took his comparative studies graduate students to churches at Peshawar, to the Buddhism sites at Taxila, Pakistan and to a Shrine of Sikhism in the same city.

The writer came on post doctorate Fullbright fellowship to the Temple University in 1988 to conduct his research on Professor Isma`il R. Al Faruqi who and his wife were assassinated in 1986. Al Faruqi started his life as a secular Arab nationalist, then became an Islamist looking for Muslim unity and praised Imam Khomeini revolution in Iran. The writer research on him that was later published by the Amana Corporation in 1994: *The Growth of Islamic Thought in North America: A Focus on Al Faruqi* was not only a great tribute to the teacher from his student but also reflected his influence on the writer.

Throughout the 1980's there were still great hopes of a Muslim unity, and the growth of Islam and Muslims around the world was witnessed. Facing financial crunch, the writer came back to America in late 1991 and joined the Islamic Center of Rochester, New York, as its Imam/Executive Director. It was an opportunity for the writer to apply his commitment to intra Muslim unity and better relations and also work for interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. The writer next publication on: *Islamic Da`wah* (Islamic Publications, Pakistan, 1996) carried some of those experiences that he went through at the Islamic center of Rochester.

The writer knew that leading a Muslim community of different ethnic groups and with different religious background would not be easy. Soon he joined the Center; one day in Maghrib Salat (sunset prayers) two brothers were following the Imam. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder and toe-to-toe. Later, they found some gap between them. They blamed one another for creating the little gap. They quarreled and were on the verge of fighting till others intervened. What would be more sinful: a gap in prayer or fighting between two Muslims? It was challenge of how to lead such community peacefully.

On another occasion while speaking on the issue of photos and the questions whether angels enters such homes or not, the writer tried to differentiate between photos and statues. Without giving him an opportunity to explain further two brothers stood up and start shouting accusing the Imam of disrespecting the Sunnah.

The problem that taking US citizenship is an act of Kufr, voting in non-Muslim country is Haram; democracy is the work of Shaytan were common

words to hear. Some Muslim would not hesitate to call others as Fasiq (a mischief maker) if would differ with his point of view. Some considered interfaith dialogue as Haram and those who participated were labeled acting as Kafirs (disbelievers).

Viewing all this and then how to keep the community united, the writer believed that these differences would not go, but if he succeeded in creating an atmosphere of listening, respectfully differing with a gentle behavior would ultimately bring unity.

The Writer's then devoted almost all of his sermons (Friday Khutbas) and lectures to topics on Muslim character, manners, etiquettes and art of dialogue.

The Art of Dialogue

Some topics were:

1. **Control Over Nafs** (desires, inner-self) is the most important requirement in intra and interfaith dialogue. Nafs instigates a person to look for self interest and prestige, comfort and money, and higher status at the cost of Islamic principles. Following the dictates of Nafs is Hawa (desires, lust). The Holy Qur'an has condemned in strong words the following of Hawa (2:120). Hawa is following Satan and Satan is people's worst enemy (the Holy Qur'an, 17:53, 7:22, 12:05). It is the work of Satan to present things before man in an attractive and beautiful manner.

2. **Large Heartedness and Forbearance:** The Prophet was Awsa`annas al Sadra (the most large hearted among people). Leading a Muslim community or preaching the words of God, it is most common to hear verbal abuse, harsh words, and false accusations, and even to be persecuted. Patience is most important on such occasions. Our Prophet stayed calm, polite, and dignified on such occasions. Muhammad never showed any resentment or anger, but bore all the hardships with patience and perseverance.

3. **Universal in character:** A Muslim Intra and Interfaith leader must refrain from tribalistic and nationalistic tendencies. Tribalism and nationalism are the enemies of Islam and Muslims. Prophet Muhammad stood above tribalism and colorism and that brought tremendous success to his mission of Islam. Islam does not deny the reality that people are born into their families, divided into tribes and nations. Islam never tried to eliminate tribes and nations. The presence of Turks, Persians, Indians, Malays, and many African tribes outside of the Arabs are the proof of Islam's liberal attitude toward them. Their culture

and language were protected. Their historical documents were saved and literary research in their culture was encouraged.

4. ***Be polite and gentle and avoid harshness***¹: Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) was known for his politeness: “And Thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character” (68:5). Allah (SWT) praised him in the Qur’an for his politeness: *It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them Wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (Their faults), and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast Taken a decision put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).* (3:159)

5. ***Speak softly and do not raise your voice***: When Allah asked Musa and Harun (Moses and Aaron, peace be upon them) to invite Pharaoh to Islam (to the religion of God), Allah told them to use a very soft and gentle form of speech. The Qur’an says: *“But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear (Allah).”* (20:44)

6. ***Do not speak ill of others or others faith***: The Qur’an says: *Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus have we made alluring to each people its own doings? In the end will they return to their Lord, and we shall then tell them the truth of all that they did.* (6:108)

7. ***Speak only about your own belief or faith, avoiding direct criticism of others or others’ belief or faith in intra Muslim or in interfaith dialogue***: This is essential for avoiding conflict. Dialogue cannot happen if participating partners start criticizing one another. Direct criticism of others raises angry, defensive emotions, and angry, defensive emotions result in conflict. For instance the Qur’an says:

“Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus have we made alluring to each people its own doings? In the end will they return to their Lord, and we shall then tell them the truth of all that they did.” (6:108)

1. Maintaining attitudes of politeness and gentleness is very challenging within materialistic and individualistic societies. In a conference in 2006, a community leader told this writer that in his community, when a certain one or two people enter the Masjid, others leave. “You always find them looking very angry. There is never a smile on their faces. Many Muslims do not come to the Masjid because of them.” In response, the community leader was advised to ask the imam to give continuous Khutbah on manners and Adab and the Islamic virtues of politeness and smiling kindly.

7. Do not compromise on the basic principles of your belief or faith with people of other beliefs or faiths in both intra and interfaith dialogue:

In the intra Muslim dialogue, the difference between Muslims, even between Sunni and Shi`a is not in the fundamentals but in details. For example all agree on the Furud (obligatory part) in the Salat, but differ in some details like many Sunni fold hand when stand for worship and many Shi`a do not and also other minor differences are there in worship that can be tolerated respectfully while praying together.

However in the interfaith dialogue, the difference is in fundamentals. One should not compromise ones own worship practices by joining with others in their worship no matter how friendly one become with people of other faiths. Conversely, one should not invite friends from other faiths to join in Salat. Of course one may always invite them to observe Salat and learn about Muslim prayers. Crossing over is not recommended in interfaith dialogue that creates more issues.

Once a group of people from the Makkans came to the Prophet (SAWS) and proposed to him that he should worship their idols during one year while during the next they would worship his God. It was during that time Allah revealed Sura Ala Kafirun rejecting such a compromise. The Prophet was asked to tell them: *“To you be your Way, and to me mine.”* (Sura Al Kafirun, 109:106).

8. Suppress anger and be forgiving: In dialogue with other partners sometimes offensive words are used. This may very well result in tension. You have to be ready to overlook and forgive for the sake of the common human good. Al-Qur’an says: *Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord, and for a Garden whose width is that (of the whole) of the heavens and of the earth, prepared for the righteous,* - (3: 133).

9. Sabr (patience): Sabr is a great virtue. Al-Qur’an repeated says: *“Allah is with those who patiently persevere”*. Interfaith dialogue is not easy. You meet with all sorts of people who hold many different opinions. Sometimes you may not like what the other says, and patience helps on such occasions.

10. Equal and Humane treatment: Al-Qur’an stands for the equality of races and is color blind. All people are equal in the eyes of Allah. A Muslim participating in interfaith dialogue should treat all people with equal respect and dignity.

11. Smile and laugh gently, not loudly or raucously: The Prophet (SAWS) would smile gently and avoided laughing loudly.² In dialogue it is also essential to keep a cheerful face and not a bored or indifferent one. The Prophet (SAWS) said, “Your smiling to the face of your brother is an act of charity”³ “To bring a smile to another’s face is a charity.”⁴

12. Pay full attention to the person speaking to you and listen attentively: Listening deeply, paying attention, and being alert are crucial to dialogue and good adab, as illustrated in the following Hadith. A man came to the Prophet (SAWS) and started talking directly at him at a time when the Prophet (SAWS) was about to lead the worship. The Prophet listened to him attentively, as if he were saying something very important, until the man finished.⁵ It is also important to understand the cultural differences in the ways people pay polite attention to each other. For example, while Muslim males and females are taught to keep their gaze down (Yaghuddu min Absarihim, Al-Qur’an, 24:30) when talking to members of the opposite sex, that same behavior is considered offensive in Europe and America. For example, once a woman came to an imam to complain that Muslims would never look at her when she was talking to them. She thought that Muslims were racist because when other people talked to them they either turned their faces away or looked down. She thanked the imam when he explained to her why some Muslims keep their gaze lower when talking to the opposite sex. In Europe and America, looking directly yet modestly at members of the opposite sex is advisable for creating better working relations. This issue could be interpreted under the category of `Urf (cultural values) in Shari`ah.

13. Being alert in public: Muslims participating in interfaith dialogue should not only look alert but should avoid hypocrisy by actually being alert— a difficult but necessary spiritual practice. It is hypocrisy to be looking as if you are listening when you are not and when in fact your mind is wandering. Of course, outward behavior is important. For instance, the Prophet (SAWS) disliked public yawning. He suppressed his own need to yawn and asked others

2. Narrated in the collection of Imam al-Tirmidhi, *Book of Virtues*, Chapter on the Cheerfulness of the Prophet (SAWS), hadith number: 3642

3. Narrated in the collection of Imam al-Tirmidhi, *Book of Righteousness and Relationships*, Chapter on the Ways of Making Righteous Deeds, hadith number: 1956

4. Shamail Tirmighi chapter on Prophet Manners of Talking

5. Mishkat, Chapter on Adab al Mufrad.

to do the same or at least to cover his/her mouth during yawning— and to suppress any sighs or other yawning noises.⁶

14. Avoid continuous speaking; give others a chance to speak. Speak to the point, be brief, and seek permission to speak. The prophet (SAWS) spoke little, spoke to the point, and spoke clearly.⁷ Do not interfere when others are talking. It is disrespectful and against the rules of polite engagement.

15. Be ready to help and volunteer for community work: Volunteering to help the needy, the poor, the sick, or the old, and helping humanity in general— these make up the core of Islam’s teaching. Networking and involvement in civil society benefits Islam and allows further interaction for dialogue. The Qur’an says: “*Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near and who are strangers, the companion by your side, the way-farer(ye meet), ... (4:36)*.” This includes every sort of volunteer work, contributing money and time, and helping all segments of humanity.

16. Be punctual: come and leave on time in meetings: Punctuality is part of Islam. All worship (‘Ibadat) in Islam is prescribed at certain times. The Qur’an says: “*When ye pass (Congregational) prayers, celebrate Allah's praises, standing, sitting down, or lying down on your sides; but when ye are free from danger, set up Regular Prayers: For such prayers are enjoined on believers at stated times.*” (4:103)

17. Taharah (Dress clean and properly): The Prophet said that Taharah, cleanliness and purity, is half of Muslim faith.⁸ Allah (SWT) commanded the Prophet (SAWS) to keep his clothes clean: “*O thou wrapped up (in a mantle)! Arise and deliver thy warning! And thy Lord do thou glorify. And thy garments keep free from stain.*” (74:1-4) The Prophet (SAWS) himself was clean and pure and asked others to be so. Once the Prophet (SAWS) said, “Let those who have hair to take care of it.”⁹ The Prophet called cleanliness

6. the collection of Imam al-Bukhari, *Book of Manners*, Chapter on Sneezing and Yawning, hadith number: 5869; the collection of Imam Muslim, *Book of Asceticism and Gentle Remembrances*, Chapter on Sneezing and Yawning, hadith number: 2994.

7. Narrated in the collection of Imam Bukhari, *Book of Exploits*, Chapter on the Characters of the Prophet (SAWS), hadith number: 3375; in the collection of Imam Muslim, *Book of the Virtues of the Companions*, Chapter on the Virtues of Abu Hurairah, hadith number: 2493.

8. Narrated in the collection of Imam Muslim, *Book of Corporeal Purification*, Chapter on the Virtues of Ablution, hadith number: 223.

9. Narrated in the collection of Imam Abu Daud, *Book of Combing One’s Hair*, Chapter on Fixing One’s Hair, hadith number: 4163.

half of faith¹⁰. In another Hadith, he advised Muslims that ten behaviors are essential acts of human nature (Fitrah). They are: clipping the mustache, growing the beard, using the Miswak (tooth brush), irrigating the nostrils with water, trimming the nails, washing the joints of hands and feet, removing hair under the armpits, and cleansing the private parts with water. The tenth may be rinsing the mouth, the narrator said.¹¹

Critical to all of the above is remembering that others may perceive each Muslim as a representative of Islam and the Prophet's teachings. Good appearance, positive attentive attitudes, and graciousness reflect Islamic principles and attributes. Proper etiquette and good manners are essential foundations for interfaith dialogue. They make possible the fulfillment of interfaith dialogue's principles.

There are some other principles in the art of dialogue that can find equal references from the Qur'an and Sunnah of the prophet:

- **Practicing Fairness:** If you happen to speak for or about another faith, you must make sure to speak in a way that people of that faith can affirm as accurate;
- **Expressing Empathy:** Each side must make an honest effort to appreciate the appeal of the other faith to those who are attracted to it and to understand the particular faith's meaning and functions for its believers and how it makes sense to them;
- **Avoiding Misuse of Scripture:** No one shall attempt to apply one's own religion in dialogue to dismiss the others' faith in what is valid and invalid;
- **Staying open to be changed and be challenged:** Each participant shall stay open to others' suggestions and shall be ready to accept a collective opinion as long as it is not contrary to the faith of the participant;
- **Steering clear of denunciations or debates:** Dialogue is not a debate and no dialogue take place when one sides seeks to denounce the position of the other side;
- **Showing reciprocity:** Each side should apply the same standard to itself that it applies to others;
- **Avoiding preconditions:** Insisting on pre-conditions for dialogue mostly defeats the purpose of dialogue;
- **Being cautious of sweeping generalization both positive or negative:** Broad generalizations obscure ambiguities within religions and differences between them;

10. Mishkat al Masabih, Vol. 1, *Kitab al Taharah*, Al fasl 1, Hadith 281.

11. Mishkat al Masabih, Vol. 1, *Kitab al Taharah*, Chapter on Miswak (tooth brush), Al fasl 1, Hadith Number: 378

- **Facing frankly areas of disagreement:** Having a thick skin and not getting insulted too easily are important disciplines in dealing with disagreement;
- **Avoiding selective use of scripture, tradition, and history when discussing issues:** A common error is to extract verses about violence from a religious text without taking the whole picture into consideration.
- **Don't assume consensus:** Participants in interfaith dialogue should not assume that every issue can be reached with consensus. Each religion and faith has its own priorities.
- **Emphasize that wisdom does not belong to any particular person of faith:** Each religion is blessed with many wise and respected adherents; no religion has a monopoly on such people.¹²

Concluding Remarks:

The word dialogue comes from the Greek word 'dialogos' and is commonly used in the meaning of conversation between two people, two groups and/or communities or organizations. Dialogue is not a debate to win or lose or to convince the other of a particular way of thinking. Dialogue is communicative conversation that involves intensely creative process with a goal to create peaceful and respectful relations among participants and in a community.

Developing basic skills in dialogue and communication can have a very positive influence on Muslim communities around the world and the West as well. The lack of such skills is a significant reason for the instability and the poor management of many masjid in America. Many Muslim leaders of these masjid may be good workers but have little experience in management, dialogue, and conflict resolution. Many still believe and practice the strategy of "silencing by authority." It is for that reason that many masjid and some other Muslim institutions that are controlled by a single entity are perceived as more stable than those run by the community.¹³

However, when living in the Western community context, interfaith dialogue

12. For detail see: Richard Landau, "What the world need to know about interfaith dialogue" at www.beliefnet.com/90/story

13. The writer took a survey of a few masjid and institutions that were established on the one hand by certain individuals and institutions and on the other by masjid run by a community organizations. It was found that institutions run by an established authority had few problems as compared with the others. In one such community-run masjid a believer, having questioned the masjid's authority, was simply asked to leave if not satisfied. A brief survey of imams indicated that many are not happy working in a masjid run by a community, but prefer to have their own.

becomes a necessity, and intra-Muslim dialogue becomes even more essential to build better understanding between the community members. Intra-faith dialogue can be an effective vehicle for building Muslim solidarity and unity especially on issues that require Muslims to contribute and sacrifice their time and resources. A weak community cannot deliver. As the Prophet said, the giving hand is always better than the receiving one.¹⁴ A weak community stands on the receiving end. Though a community may be small in number, its better organization will mean that its outreach is effective and generous. A better-organized Muslim community, regardless of its size, will gain more respect and have more impact in interfaith dialogue than a disorganized one.

Yet intra faith dialogue is most difficult than interfaith dialogue. It has been observed that many Muslim organizations are ready to participate in interfaith dialogue but they hesitate to take part in intra –faith or intra-Muslim dialogue. Once an Imam was asked to join the Council of Imams in New York State to address issues of differences between Muslims and try to build unity. The Imam answered simply saying, “We do not have differences and is not needed”. By not addressing it, the differences continued to divide the Muslim community. Muslims leaders are more challenged by the internal dialogue than they are by interfaith dialogue. In general, most imams and Muslim leaders are not trained in the rules and etiquette of intra-faith (“ecumenical”) dialogue. Many leaders of other faiths, having a long history of engagement in ecumenical dialogue, are as a result much more open to listen and learn. They have grown in confidence through practicing their dialogic techniques in their internal and external conversations.

There should not be any argument about the value of such dialogue and of the practices necessary to strengthen it. After all, the Qur’an stands for respecting diversity of opinion between members of the same community and between people of one faith and another. Religious freedom of practices and beliefs is guaranteed in Islam. The Qur’an asks people to respectfully tolerate each other’s belief and to live in peace. Every dialogue, whether it is conducted on the individual level, or with a community or between two groups of faith communities, should reveal the beautiful way of the Prophet, and the ethics of disagreement as put forth in the Qur’an and Sunnah. These are the very foundation and essence of dialogue, from which may be derived a guidance that holds true today.

14. Bukhari, *Kitab al Zakat*. Chapter on the wealthy are required to give charity, hadith number 1427 and 1429.

Intra-faith dialogue is prerequisite to a successful interfaith dialogue. A religious community or an organization that is divided within its own ranks receives little attention in interfaith dialogue. The art of both intra-faith and interfaith dialogue is joined at the hip and the rights, responsibilities and the skills that are essential for interfaith dialogue equally applies to intra-faith dialogue.

One reason that made Islamic Center of Rochester, New York to excel in interfaith dialogue was its emphasis on intra Muslim dialogue and understanding the differences with respectful toleration. The unity between Muslims of Rochester made them not only to build a very big extension of the present facilities, but it famed them with respect in the communities of America. It was under these experiences that after meeting with Dr. Mohammed Abunimer, together we committed ourselves to write a guide for Muslims in intra and interfaith dialogue.



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