

**AN EVALUATION OF ISLAMIC APPROACH TOWARD
NON-MUSLIMS
IN OUR GLOBALIZED WORLD**

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Globalization process through which our individual and societal relations turn out to be parts of world-wide network of power relations has transformed the meaning of the notion 'dialogue' dramatically. For discerning better this dramatic transformation, we should focus on the historical meanings of the notion 'dialogue'. In ancient philosophical texts, such as Plato's works, dialogue appears to have two different dimensions: 1) conversation of human soul with itself; 2) conversation between human beings toward a common purpose. In each case, this notion refers basically to incompleteness and shortcomings of human knowledge and intellect regarding universal truth. Upon this basis, it signifies that 'having a purposeful conversation with others' is being on the way toward universal truth.

Even though some contemporary Western philosophers, like Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Levinas, put great emphasis on the notion 'dialogue' so as to criticize modern subjectivism, they contributed to the development of metaphysics of "other" implicitly.

In their philosophy, the notion 'other' plays a central role in determining the significance of dialogue since it represents 'ontologically other' which has its own domain, privacy, and indeterminacy. It is insuppressible in terms of infinite depth of its historical-existential being. An encounter with this other is a historical event simply because we can come to know our finiteness and historicity through this encounter. Our existential and intellectual transformation is made possible by the dialogue with the other. In other words, dialogue happens to be a historical event in the encounter and conversation between I and Thou as being 'mutual others'.

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Obviously this philosophy of other and dialogue has a great value since it reveals ontological basis of ethics of human relations. In this movement of thought, ethics appears to be primarily an ontological demand of other in my encounter with him, and not merely as my subjective decision for him.

However, a significant problem with this philosophy arises as follows: What are we supposed to do if a world-wide network of power relations (i.e., so-called 'globalization') surpasses and determines the direction of the process of dialogue between I and Thou? If dialogue is basically an open-ended discursive play between interlocutors, are we supposed to talk about "end of dialogue" in the age of globalization which seems to surpass and threaten basic structure of dialogue?

Apparently, in our days, globalization is not a result of the dialogue between I and Thou; rather it takes place as a world-wide process within which we find ourselves in a necessary conversation. Said more openly, since in the process of globalization our individual and societal relations has been turned into different parts of world-wide network of power relations, we find ourselves in a necessary dialogue which is oriented by global powers for constructing a global system (capitalism).

Hence in our globalized world, the notion 'dialogue' signifies something which is diametrically opposite to its original historical sense, as we explored partially at the opening part of this paper. In view of this situation, we need either to deconstruct globalization process into dialogical relations, as projected by the above-mentioned contemporary philosophers or to discover a new horizon of meaning which can surpass the field of vision created by globalization process. In either case, we are confronting with great problems.

From now on, instead of exploring the meaning of these problems and offering a possible form of solution for them, I shall merely attempt to display Islamic approach toward non-Muslims in such a way to shed some light on the scope of the problems of dialogue and other within our globalized world.

Islam is a religion which gives the belief in the unity (oneness) of God a central place. Centrality of one God in Islam refers to the basic understanding that there is no "other" before God. Said differently, since one God is the absolute being and creator of

whole universe, there is no place in Islam for a dualistic notion which assumes a real place for 'other' beside God. For this reason, Muslim scholars liken the relation between God and universe to the relation between an author and his written or oral text. According to this image, every character or word in a written or oral text has the same relation with its author. There is no priority of first character or word to the last character or word in the eyes of its author. This is also to say that no word can have its own place so as to become an 'other' with respect to its author.

Similarly, in Islam no creature can occupy a real place to constitute an 'other' before God. From this theological (metaphysical) perspective, Islam doesn't allow the notion 'other' within its basic horizon of faith.

Islam bases its claim to universality upon this theological perspective as its logical extension. If God is one and creator of whole universe so as not to allow any space for an 'other' before Himself, then Islam --as His revelation-- can recognize no 'other' for itself too. Islam's claim to universality is nothing else than the world-wide projection of its giving one God a central place.

Thinking rationally, we can easily come to see that Islam has no room at its theological level for the notion "dialogue" which is made possible by the notion 'other'. For this reason, it seems futile to search for the notion 'dialogue' in the theological tradition of Islam.

In fact, the notion 'dialogue' appears to be pretty modern regarding to classical world religions which claim to universality on their own. When Western modernity (Euro-centrism) created notion 'other', as a value-laden word, in its relation to different cultures, peoples and civilizations, then it was obliged to discover and develop again the scope of the notion 'dialogue' by having recourse to ancient classical texts of philosophy.

Since Islam doesn't allow any word like 'other' and 'dialogue' in the field of its theological discourse, then it doesn't make any ontological or metaphysical difference between Muslims and non-Muslims.

However, Islam begins to approach human beings in point of their actions (*a'mâl*) at the level of ethics, religious, political, economical, and social life. Indeed, Koran refers to the relation of

God with universe in terms of 'action': "Everyday, He (God) is in new action". (*Rahman*, 55/29).

The word 'action' is of great significance in Islam since it is the key notion which indicates the basic characteristics of human life and the relationship between God and human beings. Through action, human beings cultivate, transform or destruct their own natures, physical and moral worlds. Human beings can encounter, understand and affect each other in terms of their actions. Action is not something behind which we can penetrate. Rather we can grasp ourselves and others within the horizon already opened up by our actions. Human being reveals himself as "human being" only on the threshold of his actions.

At this moment, we can reach a turning point where Islam breaks up with the dialogical schema of I and Thou, which is based on the metaphysics of other. For Islam, there is no 'other' whom I can encounter as Thou; rather there is action through which I can recognize someone as Thou. Human beings differ from and come to know each other on the basis of their actions. What makes human relations possible and necessary is the difference between human actions.

According to Prophet Muhammad, each human being is born with the same nature (*fitrah*); then he/she becomes Muslim, Christian, or Jew (in its religious sense). That is to say, each human being gain his/her own religious identity on the basis of his/her action; and on the same basis he/she distinguishes himself/herself from other identities.

What is the greatest matter for Islam is the discovery of human being "right, true and just action" (*amal salih*). In the opening section (*al-surat al-Fatiha*) of the Koran, we find an interesting verse, which is related to the problem of discovery of right, true and just action in different conditions, as follows: "Guide us toward true path". Here the word "path" doesn't indicate any objective method or principle; rather it refers to the action for discerning and choosing what is right, true and just in each situation. True action (*amal salih*) is of greatest significance for Islam since we can manage our being, our relation with human beings, animals and physical world toward common good (*khayr*) only via right and just action.

Right, true and just action is the cultivation of original nature, which is created by God, with human hands in an authentic manner. In other word, right and just action is a manner of human participation in the creative activity of God in authentic path. Accordingly the Koranic verse, "Guide us toward true path" reminds us that our action for discerning and choosing what is right, true and just in different conditions cannot be well-directed merely by our capacity to act. Human being cannot foresee the whole dimensions and possible directions of his action. This is because "action", in its active sense, can turn out to be something beyond our control as we are acting. Even action, in its passive sense, like hearing, seeing, thinking, feeling and believing, brings us something which becomes a part of our soul, and can affect us beyond our control, as Plato remarked.

For this reason, *amal salih* (true, right and just action) always remains as an ideal and problem for humanity.

From this viewpoint, Islam defines itself as a religion which offers humanity a valid schema for the development of the capacity for discerning and choosing right, true and just action in each situation. In this context, it doesn't reject different religions' contribution toward this purpose. The prophetic visions like "Go and get wisdom even if you find it in China", "Wisdom (or knowledge) is something every Muslim should seek for" indicate the value of the contributions made by different sources of knowledge.

At this point, everybody can notice the distinction made by Islam as follows: Providing 'a valid schema for the development of the capacity to act right and just' is not the same with 'seeking and receiving wisdom or knowledge'. Seeking and receiving wisdom or knowledge should always be an ideal, a matter of responsibility and a problem for every Muslim. Accordingly, all types of activity for discerning and choosing what is right, true and just in each situation is also an ideal problem to be questioned for every Muslim. '*Amal salih*' is not something to be controlled and managed by Muslim individuals at will.

This fact opens an infinite path for Muslims toward non-Muslims to seek for wisdom and knowledge altogether and apply them for establishing common good for everybody. In this context, Islam accepts '*amal salih*' (right, true and just action) as also an ideal problem to be questioned by non-Muslims in each

condition. Non-Muslims' rejection of the schema offered by Islam doesn't indicate their lack of capacity to discern and choose what is right and just in different conditions. This could otherwise contradict Islam's invitation for non-Muslims to accept its horizon of faith, or at least its invitation for People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*, i.e., Christians and Jews) to meet on some common points between Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

However, what is of the greatest significance for Islam is the development of humanity's capacity for discerning and choosing what is right and just for every being. Said briefly, truth and justice are always more fundamental problem than non-Muslims admission or rejection of the schema offered by Islam. This is because non-Muslims too have been participating in the creative activity of God with their own actions at every moment. I assume that Koranic verse, which declares human being as representative and agent (*khalif*) of God in this world, indicates the participation of humanity in His creative activity on earth.

Truth and justice are the most urgent fundamental problems of humanity in our globalized world. Global problems like suffer, oppression, war, hunger, assimilation, ignorance or educational imbalance etc. seem to be different dimensions and results of the problems of truth and justice. True, right and just action remains always as an ideal problem for every human being, no matter he is Muslim or non-Muslim. I believe this question opens a field of vision before us more fundamental and universal than globalization. If we are willing and seeking for a real dialogue, in its original sense, we are supposed to pose the problem of true, right and just action before us as an ideal fundamental question. Only upon this problem, we can compare and contrast different visions and schemas offered by different religions so as to determine different dimensions of this problem and the validity of their visions and schemas.

As a conclusion, Islamic approach toward non-Muslims is not something to be determined and evaluated solely according to some literal texts or formal principles. Rather what concerns Islam beforehand is the capacity of non-Muslims to act right, true and just in each condition. This is because via this type of action (*amal salih*), human can participate in the creative activity of God in a constructive way. Wrong, untrue, and unjust action indicates human participation in the creative activity of God in a de-

structive manner. I believe, the worldwide risks of war, hunger, suffer, oppression, environmental crises, etc., which have been threatening the present and the future of whole world, reflect human participation in the creative activity of God in a destructive manner.

Whether non-Muslims accept or reject the schema or field of vision offered by Islam is a matter of belief, heart, thought, and form of life. However, in any case they are not to be considered by Muslims as 'others'. Since the word 'other' implies an ontological gap, distance or alienation between human beings, it indicates the heart of problem which Islamic theology aims to annihilate in the field of human relations. Islam urges humans to know each other (ta'aruf) on the basis of difference between their nations or tribes. We can be different in our actions. But we are all faced with the same universal fundamental problem of discerning and choosing right, true and just action at every moment. This fact should bring us together continuously and then endow the notion 'dialogue' with its original sense.