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Obstacles to Peaceful coexistence in Abrahamic Religions¹

“Say: O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we worship none but God and do not associate any with Him, and that we do not take each others instead of God” (Holy Quran, 3. 64)

Introduction

I would like to start with my sincere thanks to the organizers of this important meeting and sincerely hope that our endeavours today will bring us one step forward to a better understanding of each other, resulting in a more peaceful coexistence of the followers of the great Abrahamic traditions in today’s turbulent world.

I would also like to proceed my deliberations with three short observations:

¹. Paper presented by Dr. Abdolrahim Gavahi on the occasion of Dialogue between Islam and Christianity, Spain, Dec 19-20, 2008.

1. At the present time, misunderstanding and hostility do exist both within Abrahamic religions (Iraq, Ireland, etc.) and between them (Palestine, Leban, Iraq, U.S.A. etc).
2. According to the main tenets of these three great traditions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, hostility towards the followers of the other two is not part of the necessary teachings of any of them. In other words, hostility is an auxiliary feature and not an intrinsic one².
3. Hostility and antagonism is not a desired thing and so we all need to reappraise our understanding and positions against each other in order to remove and eradicate such an enmity and replace it by genuine affection and cooperation³.

Various Misunderstandings and Hostilities

Although, in order to be brief, we only address the creedal aspect of misunderstanding and enmity, and will try to propose some solutions and remedies to it, but this does not mean that there are no problems in other areas such as cultural, political, or economic matters. Nevertheless, in recent decades, with the advent of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the threat felt by its spread over other parts of Muslim world, there seems to be a steady trend in promoting Islamophobia and adding fuel to the misunderstandings vis-avis Islam & the Muslim community, many signs of which are

². On the Holy Quran's teaching of peace and coexistence see, for example, Q. 3.64, 67.

³. For details see M. M. Shabestari, A Critique of Official Reading of Religion, p. 317.

obvious in the propaganda in mass media and other means of communication.

Historical Background

As mentioned before, misunderstanding and antagonism is by no means limited to the relations of Abrahamic religions with each other, but rather it exists between different branches of each religion as well. The fact is that there is no great tradition, be it Abrahamic or non-Abrahamic, that, historically speaking, there are not at least two main branches developed in it during the course of time (perhaps Confucianism and Shintoism are possible exceptions), hence causing internal dispute and clashes from the very early days of the inception of that tradition.

Also, sometimes, we notice different levels of division and branching within the same tradition, like Buddhism and Jainism which are branches of Hinduism, but have in turn been divided into further branches such as Mahayana and Hinayana in Buddhism and Svetambara and Digambara in Jainism.

In Abrahamic religions, we have Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant branches in Christianity, Shiite and Sunnite in Islam, and Orthodox, Liberal, and Conservative denominations in Judaism. Internal dispute and struggle between these branches of Abrahamic religions has a long old history. Yet, what we are concerned with is misunderstanding and conflict between the religions themselves, the most prominent example of which is Crusades between Muslims and Christians, although the early reaction of Jews against the newly born Christian community has by no means been less brutal.

On the long standing enmity and misunderstanding of Muslims by Christians, late Orientalist and Islamologist Annemarie Schimmel says:

“Among all the religions which Christianity had to confront and deal with, Islam was both misunderstood and attacked most intensely. For more than a millennium Islam seemed to be a major-if not the major-threat for the people of Europe, and this feeling has contributed to the fact that Islam and those who confessed it, the Muslims, were regarded as arch enemies of Christianity and Western Civilization⁴.”

Amongst many example of such enmity, only in the field of publications, one can cite the recent examples of Salman Rushdi’s “Satanic Verses”⁵ and Robert Spencer’s “The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic Law Treats Non-Muslims”⁶.

Creedal Foundations of Misunderstanding and Hostility

Historical misunderstanding and hostility within the family of Abrahamic religions has different doctrinal reasons, some of which are as follows:

1. Dogmatic and absolute interpretation of religion and negation of religious pluralism⁷.

⁴. Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction*, State University of New York Press, 1992, p.1.

⁵. Viking Publications, Lodon, 1988.

⁶. Prometheus Books, New York, 2005.

⁷. See John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 1985.

2. Distancing from the original teachings of these religions, teachings such as a single God⁸, single religion⁹, and single community of believers¹⁰.
3. Not recognizing the continuity and succession of the three particular denominations of the religion of Abraham, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, thus negating the truthfulness of the second and third religion (s) by the preceding one (s)¹¹.
4. Gradual emergence of some incorrect beliefs amongst some of the followers of these religions (such as the belief in racial supremacy amongst some Jews¹², or Jesus deification amongst some Christians¹³).
5. The inclination of different religious communities to divide into different branches and denominations, each group being satisfied with his own sub-division¹⁴.
6. Hasty reference to some passages of each others' Book, just for the sake of mutual attack and condemnation (such as some verses of Jihad in Quran¹⁵, or similar verses in the old testament¹⁶ and the New testament¹⁷).

⁸. Holy Quran 21.92.

⁹. Holy Quran 5. 19.

¹⁰. Holy Quran 10.19.

¹¹. Holy Quran 2.113.

¹². Holy Quran 5.18.

¹³. Holy Quran 5.116.

¹⁴. Holy Quran 30.32.

¹⁵. Holy Quran 9.36.

¹⁶. Bible, Deutronomy, 20. 4, 14, ...

¹⁷. Bible, Matthew, 10. 34-5.

7. Finally, ignoring the local culture and religion of the indigenous people by mainly European occupying forces (in relation to American Indians, African Negros, etc).

Non-Doctrinal Causes of Hostility

In the long history of human civilization, there are many instances of enmity and antagonism which at first appear to be religiously motivated, but are not. Among many different non-religious causes of such enmities, the followings seem to be more apparent:

1. Racial discrimination and inequality of human beings,
2. Servage and slavery in the old societies,
3. Exploitation and economic injustice,
4. Colonialization and political injustice¹⁸.

Call for Mutual Understanding and Cooperation

1. One of the most important reasons for mutual understanding and cooperation between the followers of the three great Abrahamic religions is the fact that at the dawn of the twenty-first century, mankind has full-heartedly realized that prolonged hostility and blood-shedding, due to excessive extremism and dogmatic belief in one's religion, is a useless matter, only harming human culture and

¹⁸. For details see Edward W. Saeed, *Orientalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd. London, 1978.

civilization. While, as it is mentioned in all the sacred Books including Holy Quran¹⁹, in the second article of the Declaration of Human Rights²⁰, and in the article twenty-three of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the freedom of belief of all men has to be recognized and respected.

2. Another reason for peaceful coexistence by the followers of all living religions, let alone Abrahamic ones, is to adhere to the accepted practice in the Christian and international “ethics of war” tradition that going to war should always be the last resort in dealing with any conflict and difference of opinions and interests²¹, especially when we are faced with a doctrinal dispute or a minor difference of opinion.
3. Historically speaking, Abrahamic religions, except for some short periods of hostility, have also had long periods of understanding and cooperation in the fields of culture, commerce, science and technology, trade, etc. , a situation which is still prevailing in many parts of the world²². In my home country Iran, not only our ancient king Cyrus the Great has been mentioned as saviour of the Jews in the Old testament²³, but also the Jews have longed lived in Iran in complete peace and tranquility. Furthermore, during the reign of King Abbas, the mighty Safavid Emperor, when

¹⁹. Holy Quran 2.256.

²⁰. Full text is in M.M. Shabestari, *ibid*, p. 209.

²¹. For details see Gregory M. Reichberg, Henric Syse and Endre Begly, *the Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Reading*, Blackwell Publishing, U.S.A., 2006.

²². For details see Richard W. Bulliet, *the case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004.

²³. Bible, the book of Ezra, chapter 1, verse 25.

some Armerian Christians decided to emigrate to Iran, the King located them in a very green neighborhood called Julfa in the city of Isfahan, then capital of Iran. Julfa still embraces the oldest church of Iran.

4. As we have already mentioned, in the continuous chain of Abrahamic religions, we are not faced with a set of new and separate religions, but with a set of new “Prophets” within the same religion. Although sometimes our Christian and Jewish brothers, due to their high respect for Abraham the forefather of all Abrahamic religions, claim that only they are the true descendants of Abraham, or that Abraham belongs to them alone²⁴! a point well denied in the Bible²⁵ and the holy Quran²⁶.

It is worth mentioning that the main goal of all these Prophets within Abrahamic tradition has been to promote understanding and cooperation between various groups of people and not to create discord and misunderstanding. That is why, when we notice some criticism of the Jews in the Gospel²⁷, or of the Christians and Jews in the Quran²⁸, they are out of sympathy and intended to correct some deviations only.

5. There is no doubt that Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Prophet Muhammad, and all other Prophets and Messengers of God were appointed and sent to man in order to attain and enhance the good and welfare of the mankind²⁹, and such

²⁴. Holy Quran 2.140.

²⁵. Bible, Matthew, chapter 15, verse 25.

²⁶. Holy Quran 2.130, 135.

²⁷. Mathew, chapters 15 and 16.

²⁸. Holy Quran 5.63.

²⁹. Holy Quran 21.107.

attainment is not possible but through peace and cooperation of all human race.

6. Finally, today mankind is faced with many different problems and calamities, any attempt to face and solve them requires sympathy and cooperation of all religious persons of the world, including the Jews, Christians, and Muslims; problems such as destruction of natural environment, pollution and global warming, poverty, homelessness, violation of human rights in many parts of the world, widespread social and economic injustices, racial discrimination, weakening of family bonds and values, moral and ethical decadence, anarchism, atheism, and many more issues of concern. How is it possible to face all these ruinous problems threatening the man, nature, and the life on earth, without first making a unified front of all the people concerned and affected by these misfortunes?

Summary and Conclusion

1. Today, more than any other time, we, the followers of different Abrahamic religions, need to remove the existing misunderstandings and come up with a correct conception of each other.
2. Cooperation between different branches of the Abrahamic religion is not only possible, but also necessary and obligatory.

3. Within each tradition, and between all three traditions, we have to start from common beliefs, always referring to our great Prophets as the archetypes of understanding and human behavior.

Let us conclude our discussion with the following prayer from the Holy Quran:

“O’ our God, forgive us and our brothers who have preceded us in faith, and do not place any rancor in our hearts concerning those who believe; Lord, you are compassionate and Merciful”. (Holy Quran, 59. 10)