Islam and Religious Freedom
Role of Interfaith Dialogue in promoting Global Peace

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Introduction

As President Obama said in his historic speech at Cairo university – Egypt, last June, the U.S. seeks "a new beginning " with Muslim communities around the world based on the shared principles of justice, progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings. Obama, also said: it is firm in my belief that the interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart.

This message is maintained in the Qur'an which was revealed more than fourteen centuries ago. It provides, *"O Mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another". (13/49).*

It should, therefore, become the premises of our gathering to foster peace and eliminate tension and conflicts which dominate many regions of our world which is supposed to be a place for human civilization.

This paper shall tackle four main parameters:

First : the background of the problem.

Second: the stand of Islam towards the religious freedom.

Third : the essencial role of interreligious dialogue in connecting communities of discourse on the international, regional and national levels.

Fourth: the Egyptian role in promoting interfaith dialogue on the international, regional and national level.

First, the background of the problem

In the shadow of the September 11, 2001 attacks, interest in interfaith dialogue boomed, as an essential tool for bridging the divided in modern societies with multiple identities and religious pluralism which is deeply shaped by Globalization.

Now it is high time for the great majority who are convinced and supporting peaceful co- existence between believers of different faith and beliefs as a corner stone to global peace and justice to strongly take the initiative for isolating those who are working desperately by all means to keep the road open for fanatesesiam , clash and violence.

But fulfillment of the goal will build up day after day through the practical behaviours of people who belong to different religions, cultures and civilizations global wise when they conduct dialogue and get to know each other correctly, respecting the privacy of each other and discover the comenalities which gather them.

The above mentioned goal will not be achieved by declarations and recommendations only, at the elite level, but primarily through institutional work of the international organizations, the civil societies and governments to reach politetions , decision makers, community leaders and most important people at the grass – root level.

Second; the stand of Islam towards the religious freedom

- Is Islam opposed to the freedom of belief ?

1- Islam guarantees the freedom of religion this is verified in the following Qur'anic verse: *"Let there be no compulsion in*

religion". *(2/256)*. Accordingly, no one is forced to renounce his religion in favour of another faith.

2- One's freedom to adhere to the religion of one's choice establishes the base of his belief , and this emphasized the following Qur'anic verse: *"Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it)"*. *(18/29)*.

3- Declaring the freedom of belief means Islam accepting that there is more than one religion. This was stressed by the prophet in the first constitution of the Islamic state in Al- Madina when he acknowledged Judaism and declared that Jews and the Muslims in Al- Madina formed one nation.

4- An example of Islam's granting religious freedom, is **Omar Ibn Al- Khattab's** treatment of the **Christians of Jerusalem** whom he guaranted the safety of their lives, their churches, and their crosses, assuring them that none of them would be harmed on account of his religion.

5- Islam also grants freedom of thought and opinion provided that discussions on religion are of an objective nature and are not a pretext for abuse and ridicule. This is stated in the following Qur'anic verse: *"Invite (all) to the way of your creator with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious"* *(16/125)*.

6- In the light of this tolerance, discussions may take place between Muslims and non Muslims. The Qur'an invites the Muslims to discuss matters with the people of the book in the following Qur'anic verse: *"O people of the Book ! come to common terms*

as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we elect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God. If then they turn back, say: Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to the will of God)". (3/64).

This verifies that should the discussion between both parties fail to accomplish its aim, each person is entitled to adhere to the faith in which he believes.

7- This also what the following Qur'anic verse expressed concerning the prophet Mohamed's final remarks to the pagans of Makkah, namely: *"you have your religion and I have mine". (109/6)*

Third; Importance of interfaith dialogue in peaceful co- existence

We have to ask tow important questions:

- How can interreligious dialogue regain trust between the Islamic world and the west ?

- How can interreligious dialogue connecting communities of discourse ?

Prerequisites for the establishment of successful and effective dialogue. Establishing trust between any two human communities is generally based on several conditions which may be summed up in the following points:

1- Recognition of the other, and dealing with him on the basis of equality. This is a fundamental prerequisite that can not be overlooked, otherwise would be eliminated and his existence

would equal to his non existence. Consequently there would be no parties each recognizing the other but there would be only one dominant party giving orders to be obeyed by the other and enforcing its will on that other, and rejecting any opposition to its stands. In which case there could be no way to establish trust between the two parties concerned.

2- <u>Mutual respect:</u> the mere recognition of **"The Other"** is not sufficient. This means that each party should respect the other, his religion, faith, belief, customs, tradition and civilization and cultural characteristics and in general his **human rights**. This mutal respect is the first true basis for any dialogue or understanding or co- operation between the two parties.

It must be taken in consideration here that mutal respect does not necessarily means accepting the stands of **"The Other"**, but it means the willingness of every party to listen to **"The Other"** and to accept in a constructive way his ideas or criticism.

3- <u>Dialogue between the two parties:</u> Dialogue between the two parties is the natural outcome of the recognition of **"The Other"** and of mutal respect and understanding between the two parties. Through dialogue each party may understand **"The Other"**, its stands, its position, its circumstances, its beliefs and the characteristics of its civilization. Moreover dialogue eliminates the misunderstanding as well as the preconceived ideas and misconceptions of each party towards **"The Other"**. Dialogue likewise makes it possible for both parties to identify common grounds in theirs civilization, culture or history or the fields that may be utilized for the interest of both.

4- <u>Tolerance with the other:</u> Dialogue as mentioned above is not an end in itself but it is a mean to achieve tolerance which in turn promotes culture exchange , common understanding and positive and peaceful co- existence, and consolidates the roots of mutal cooperation in all spheres and at all levels.

5- <u>Joint cooperation:</u> there is no doubt that an atmosphere such as that mentioned above paves the way for establishing trust and promoting cooperation between the two parties. A matter which could ultimately lead to the expansion of the scope of cooperation not only between that two parties but with others as well, so that all may cooperate in laying down the foundation for peace and stability in the whole world. Our common world and our ultimate goal which is "Global Peace".

Forth; The Role of Egypt in promoting interfaith dialogue

Having good faith in the role a meaningful and constructive dialogue can attaning a better coexistence among followers of different religions and cultures; Egypt earnestly attempts for the last twenty years to sponsor such a creative thought which is based on dialogue. This is mainly for the sake of promoting better understanding and cooperation among peoples and nations at a world which became closely interrelated where relations among those nations and individuals depend due to the accelerated improvements in technology, communication, flow of information and the immense mutal influence of global events on the world which became a small village. Those development necessitate the

existence of positive sense of co- existence in the planet on which we are all live.

Egypt has no doubt that intellectuals are the one who would carry the niches of enlightenment for their people and nations. They are shouldered with delivering this message through justice and equity. Therefore, ardent pursuit of communication avenues and cooperation became inevitable bases for this dialogue, which must be implemented and supported for disseminating objective understanding of the core message of all religions, cultures and civilization.

For this purpose Egypt hosted, participated, shared and promoted so many activities and events over the last twenty years concerning dialogue between different religions, cultures and civilization.

I On the international level:

1- Egypt made the agreement of interfaith dialogue between **Al- Azhar** and **the Vatican**, 1998.

2- Egypt made the agreement of interfaith dialogue which fulfilled between Al- Azhar and the church of England (Canter Berry), 2001.

3- Egypt hosted the conference of world economic forum **(Davos)** and its round table about interfaith dialogue, two times in **Sharm El- Sheikh**, year 2006 and 2007.

4- Egypt participated in **Davos** conference and its round table discussions about "Dialogue between civilization" which was held in New York in 2002.

5- Egypt participated in **Davos** conference in Switzerland in year 2003 concerning all discussions and possible implementation of **"Interfaith dialogue among monotheistic religions".**

6- Participation in the interfaith dialogue activities held in parallel with **Olympic Games** held in Atheins – Grece, 2004.

7- Shared with Saudi – Arabia in the conference of **"Dialogue between civilizations"** which was held in Madreid – Spaine, 2008.

8- Egypt was sharing with Saudi – Arabia in the conference of **"Dialogue among cultures and civilizations"** which was held in New York in 2008.

II On the regional level:

1- Egypt was participating in all the regional conferences and meetings held in Jordon and other Arab countries which was organized by **"The Arab thought foundation"** headed by prince El- Hassan Ben TalaL.

2- Participation in the conference of interreligious dialogue which was hold at Makkah – Saudi – Arabia in year 2007 which was the base afterwards for Madreid and New York conferences about **"Dialogue between cultures and civilizations"** one year after.

III On the national level:

1- The supreme council for Islamic affairs holds the round tables activities concerning interfaith dialogue as part of the parallel activities of its annual conference over the last five years and the title of the last one which was held in March, 2009 is peace, Justice and Fighting extremism.

2- Egypt host and participate over the last six years with the **Middle East council of churches** in meetings and round table discussions concerning mutal respect, tolerance and co- existence.

3- Several activities and working papers concerning implementation of the culture of dialogue at the grass root level with cooperation between government and civil society.

4- Establishment of **Annalind foundation for "Dialogue between civilizations"** in Alexandria – Egypt more than ten years ago.

Thank you

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