CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROPHETIC INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: FOUNDATION FOR CONTEMPORARY INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ENTERPRISE

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Abstract

This study extracts the main characteristics of the interfaith dialogue that had been carried out during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime from six models of interfaith dialogue during that time. The six models are based on engagements of the Prophet Muhammad in six different occasions, in both, Meccan and Medinan periods: dialogues with 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām, Najāshī of Abyssinia, Christians of Najran, antagonistic Jews of Medina, Heraclius of Byzantine Empire and Khosrow of Sassanian Empire. Analysis of this study has employed the historical hermeneutics of Ibn

Khaldūn (1332-1406) to unveil the underlying contexts of the six Prophetic interfaith dialogue models. On the other hand, the derivation of the Prophetic interfaith dialogue characteristics is based on observation of the salient features applied in all the models of Prophetic interfaith dialogue. The study concludes that all the Prophetic interfaith dialogue was carried out in the spirit that dialogue is a form of *da'wah*. Among the characteristics of this Prophetic interfaith dialogue models, 'principle-centred' is the most consistent. Other characteristics are clarity and precision, openness and respect, confidence and non-arrogance, non-evasion and peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: Prophetic Interfaith Dialogue; historical hermeneutics; comparative religion; dialogue; interfaith dialogue.

Khulasah

Kajian ini mengekstrak ciri-ciri utama dialog inter agama yang diamalkan oleh Nabi Muhammad s.a.w sepanjang kehidupan baginda berdasarkan enam model dialog. Enam model tersebut berasaskan interaksi baginda dengan kelompok bukan Muslim dalam enam peristiwa yang berlaku semasa zaman Mekah dan Madinah iaitu dialog dengan 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām, Raja Najāshī dari Abyssinia, Kristian Najran, Yahudi yang menentang baginda di Madinah, pemimpin empayar Bytantium bernama Heraclius dan pemimpin empayar Sassanid bernama Khosrow. Analisa kajian ini menggunakan kaedah hermeneutika sejarah yang diperkenalkan oleh Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) untuk mendedahkan konteks yang menaungi keenam-enam model dialog inter agama tersebut. Manakala ciri-ciri dialog inter agama gaya Nabi Muhammad s.a.w dirumuskan berdasarkan sifat terpenting yang diaplikasi dalam keenam-enam model tersebut. Kajian ini merumuskan bahawa kesemua bentuk dialog inter agama gaya Nabi Muhammad s.a.w. adalah merupakan usaha *da'wah* baginda kepada Islam. Di antara ciri-ciri model dialog inter

agama gaya Nabi ini, ciri 'berpaksikan prinsip' merupakan ciri yang paling konsisten. Ciri-ciri lain adalah kejelasan dan ketepatan, keterbukaan dan hormat, keyakinan diri dan tidak bongkak, tidak lari daripada berhujah, serta kehidupan bersama secara aman.

Kata kunci: Dialog inter agama gaya Nabi; hermeneutika sejarah; perbandingan agama; dialog; dialog inter agama.

Introduction

It is perhaps dominant in the mind of a Muslim who is used to living in a majority Muslim community that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him, hereinafter cited as p.b.u.h.) was very close and warm to his companions. The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. was a great educator to his companions and he was remembered to have taught the Muslims about Islam as a way of life and reminded them about the value of this life to strengthen their faith.

While this mental image is correct, if such imagination neglects the other part of the Prophetic encounters, that is with the non-Muslims, the mental image is partial thus it is susceptible to an erroneous perspective of the Muslim identity and his role in the human society. In fact, the Prophet's interaction with non-Muslims took place on daily basis, throughout both periods, Meccan and Medinan. It is this interaction that constitutes *da'wah* or invitation to Islam.

Among the interactions throughout the Prophet Muhammad's life with non-Muslims, few cases are regarded as most outstanding. These cases that will be analyzed further in this article involved both periods of the Prophetic lifetime: Meccan (approximately 610 A.D. to 623 A.D.) and Medinan (approximately 623 A.D. to 633 A.D.) periods.

The cases are first, the dialogue between the Prophet and 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām in the early phase of Medinan

period; second, the engagement of the Prophet Muhammad with al-Aṣhamah al-Najāshī, the King of Abyssinia which started since the Meccan period and lasted throughout the Medinan period; third, the written dialogue between the Prophet p.b.u.h. and Heraclius (the Byzantine emperor); fourth, the dialogue between the Prophet and Christians of Najran in the post victory and stability of Muslim community in Arabian Peninsula; fifth, the dialogue of the Prophet Muhammad and the Jews of Medina; and sixth, the letter of the Prophet p.b.u.h. Parvez or Khosrow II (the Sassanian emperor). The analysis of these cases has applied the historical method of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406) or Khaldunian historical hermeneutics.

Methodology

In his magnum opus, *al-Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn emphasized on the importance of exercising one's critical mind to assess the authenticity of narratives on which a historical report is based. He listed various factors by which a narrator might commit errors including his sectarian bias and exaggeration of numerical facts or description. The distinguished point that Ibn Khaldūn laid in his historiography is the understanding of the contexts that governed the historical scene. He also elaborated on the significance of considering the sequence of events that happened in history and how the events that took place in the past might have influenced the events that occurred later. Besides, he also warned against evaluating the past through the yardstick of contemporary time.[1]

The analysis of the Prophetic interfaith dialogue cases in this article have applied these Khaldunian methods by an

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[1] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah li Kitāb al-ʿIbar wa Dīwān al-Mubtadā' wa al-Akhbār fi Ayyām al-ʿArab wa al-ʿAjam wa al-Barbar wa man ʿĀṣarahum min Dhawī al-Sulṭān al-Akbar* (Egypt: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Azhariyyah, 1930), 7-29. See also: Abū Yārib al-Marzūki, *al-Ijtimāʿ al-Naẓarī al-Khaldūnī wa al-Tārīkh al-ʿArabiy al-Muʿāṣir* (Tunisia: Dār al-ʿArabiyyah li al-Kitāb, 1985), 34-42.

attempt to unveil the historical contexts through various Muslim sources and triangulated the facts against the sources of non-Muslims which reported similar events. It does not suffice to depend on only one piece of narrative about the event involved, but the contextual circumstances that governed the specific event as contained in the various reports and sources are accumulated and brought together, taking into account the sequence of events that took place.

To conform to the validity and authenticity of narration as required in the methodology, where *ḥadīth* is used, it is cited together with the *takhrij* (the process of extraction and validation of reliability of narrators and authenticity of the *ḥadīth* texts) which has previously been exercised by the scholars of sciences of *ḥadīth*. There is limitation, however, in applying Khaldunian hermeneutics. The limitation is in the analysis of cases where only a small number of narratives are traced, notably regarding the sequence of events and contextual aspects that were involved in a specific historical event.

The Models of Prophetic Interfaith Dialogue

Six most significant cases that represent interfaith dialogue in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad have been analyzed by considering the reliability and authenticity of the narratives involved. Where data is available, the dialogue settings, sociocultural, socio-political as well as the global contexts that governed them are also evaluated.

Six models of prophetic interfaith dialogue are formed from the six interfaith dialogue cases. The models are arranged according to the degree of the interlocutors' styles of approaching the Prophet with the most peaceful and easy style being the first, and the provocative and hostile styles of the other interlocutor being the last.

The First Model: Dialogue of the Prophet p.b.u.h. with 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām

The first model is the dialogue of the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. with 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām (d. 664 A.D.), who was

originally named al-Ḥusayn.[2] He was a learned Jew of Yathrib, known among Yathrib Jews as a man of wisdom who had the profound knowledge of the Scripture. He could be regarded as a source of reference for their religious affairs. ʿAbd Allāh approached the Prophet during the early days of the Prophet's arrival at Yathrib. He was curious to clarify the signs that Muhammad had as a prophet appointed by Allah. His curiosity was more of the motive to verify the truth of the prophecy based on his knowledge of the Jewish Scripture about the coming of a new Prophet.

The general context when this dialogue took place could be described as 'psychologically unsettled' of the majority of Meccan Muslims who recently arrived at Yathrib from Mecca in the process called *hijrah* or emigration. *Hijrah* was ordered by Allah to assure the protection of the Prophet's life, and that of Meccan Muslims', their faith and religious practices against the brutal and tyrannic Quraysh. Despite the hospitality and warm welcome of Yathrib Muslims, the human factor that Meccan Muslims experienced could not be denied. They had undergone various forms of severe torture from the Quraysh, suffered the loss of homes and belongings, while some have even lost their family members.

Yathrib at the time of *hijrah* was a city that composed of a diverse community, ranging from the newly reverted ʿAws and Khazraj Arab tribes; the Jews from various tribes which allied respectively with the two Arab tribes; the non-Muslims; and those who were threatened by the coming of Muhammad, an outsider who was also a highly calibre man, potentially appointed as a leader of the city. The last group was the supporters of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubay ibn Salūl, the man who almost became the 'king' of Yathrib on the eve of Muhammad's arrival.

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[2] Muḥammad Riḍā, *Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, n.d.), 186.

In the dialogue, 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām asked the Prophet about the signs of the Last Day, the first food that shall be tasted in paradise, and the factor that influenced the resemblance of a child to his/her respective parents. The reception of the Prophet was composed and calm. He managed to answer the question one-by-one very convincingly which rendered 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām's acceptance for Islam. The Prophet then gathered the Jews and asked them about their opinion about 'Abd Allāh - his knowledge and how they generally regarded him.

Initially the Jews replied that they perceived that 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām was the knowledgeable and reliable among them. When 'Abd Allāh came out and announced that he had converted to Islam, the Jews changed their views on him and denied his credibility. The response of the Jews gave some signals to the Prophet on the Jewish character generally. On the other hand, 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām remained steadfast with Islam and later become a very good Muslim.[3]

The Second Model: Dialogue of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and al-Aṣḥamah al-Najāshī through Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib

The second model of interfaith dialogue is the dialogue between the delegation of Muslims led by Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib with the Christian king in Abyssinia or Najāshī named al-Aṣḥamah. A group of around sixteen Muslims migrated to Abyssinia around the 5th year of Prophecy to seek refuge for their lives and faith against the torment of Quraysh. Despite being a Christian state at that time, Abyssinia was chosen as a shelter because al-Aṣḥamah was renowned for his justice in ruling.[4]

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[3] Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Book 55, vol. 4 (Cairo: al-Matba'ah al-Salafiyah, 1979), ḥadīth number 546.

[4] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikrī, 2003), 17; al-Mubārakfūrī, *al-Bahth fī al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah 'alā Ṣāḥibihā afḍal al-Ṣalāh wa al-Salām*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-

The dialogue between Muslims and Abyssinian Christians was initiated as a result of provocation by ʿAbd Allāh ibn Abī Rabīʿah and ʿAmr bin al-ʿĀṣ who requested that the Muslims who sought refuge in Abyssinia be extradited. ʿAbd Allāh ibn Abī Rabīʿah and ʿAmr bin al-ʿĀṣ were actually representing Quraysh of Mecca.[5] The dialogue between Jaʾfar and Aṣhamah took place in the kings' court. To be able to deliver the message to the king, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Abī Rabīʿah and ʿAmr bin al-ʿĀṣ had to pass through the Christian patriarchs and bishop, who administered the Abyssinian court.

The latter were bribed with gifts from Quraysh to make way for meeting the king. When those Quraysh representatives were able to communicate with the king and made the request for extradition of the Muslim group, they justified that the Muslims were troublemakers of Mecca who needed to be morally regulated by their own people. Being a very wise and just king, al-Aṣhamah called upon the Muslims for clarification. He questioned about the new religion which was accused as the source of all problems between these Muslims and their people in Mecca.[6]

Jaʿfar explained in detail by comparing the lives of these Muslims before and after practising the teachings of this new religion. He then expounded the values that Islam brought then gradually described the consequences that those new followers had to suffer, in terms of Quraysh's brutality, for practising Islam. His explanation was appealing to al-Aṣhamah. He responded with a clear signal of acknowledgement that Islam and Christianity came from the same source. He further he extended his protection over

ʿIlmiyyah, 2001), 124; Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet* (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2005), 116.

[5] ʿAbd al-Mālik ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat Shaqrūn; Maktabah al-Kulliyyāh al-Azhariyyah, 1978), 317-330.

[6] *Ibid.*, 333.

the Muslims while they were in Abyssinia as long as he ruled there.[7]

The two Quraysh representatives were not satisfied with al-Aṣḥamah's stance in this issue thus they built another case by pointing out that the new religion would potentially become a threat to Christianity. This was due, according to them, to the central theological difference between these two religions on matters related to the concept of God and Jesus identity. Jaʿfar was once again ordered to explain about Islamic perspective and stance on that concept. He clarified very clearly and precisely about the stance of this new religion on Jesus, mentioning that in Islam, Jesus was not God, but His servant. He neither lied nor evaded the controversial question which might potentially expose himself and the Muslims to danger. Al-Aṣḥamah was, surprisingly, satisfied with the explanation and responded in reaffirmation of his protection over the Muslims. The patriarchs and bishops that were present during the dialogue session in the court were upset with this statement.[8]

Following the dialogue was a revolt which was more of an open rebellion against al-Aṣḥamah. The Christians of Abyssinia were unhappy with al-Aṣḥamah's stance on the identity of Jesus. Before facing his people and knowing their response, al-Aṣḥamah had planned for the Muslims' safety just in case he was being overthrown by his people. He secured them a boat to escape if things turned bad in the state. However, the situation improved so the Muslims remained in Abyssinia for the period of almost 16 years. There was undeniably an attempt by the Muslims to return to Mecca. The attempt, however, was not because of unhappiness of Abyssinian condition. It was rather caused by the rumour that spread on Quraysh and Mecca. The

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[7] *Ibid.*, 334-335.

[8] *Ibid.*, 336.

rumour said that Quraysh elites had come to terms with Muslims in sharing the idols of worship.[9]

The rumour was, however, learned to be untrue. In fact, the torture and torment onto Muslims worsened. Because of that, a bigger number of Muslims, which was estimated around 111 left Mecca to Abyssinia in the second emigration. These people had returned to Medina gradually after *hijrah* with the last of them reaching Medina during the battle of Khaybar in the year of 7th *hijrah*.

What most interesting was the relationship that was formed between al-Aṣḥamah and the Prophet Muhammad from the distance. There were few letters that the Prophet had sent to al-Aṣḥamah. The first was the one which entrusted al-Aṣḥamah to be the middle person for the Prophet in dealing with the latter's engagement and marriage with Ramlah bint Abū Sufyān or Ummu Ḥabībah while he was in Medina and Ramlah was in Abyssinia. The second was a letter inviting al-Aṣḥamah to Islam. Whether al-Aṣḥamah embraced Islam before or after he received the letter was not confirmed, yet he died as a Muslim. When the news of Ashamah's death reached the Prophet p.b.u.h., he performed *ṣalāt al-ghayb*, the prayer for the deceased who was not present before the one who prays.

The Third Model: Written Dialogue between the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. and Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor

The third model of interfaith dialogue is a written form. It started with the letter sent by the Prophet to the emperor of Byzantine Empire named Heraclius. The letter was sent through the ambassador of the Prophet, Diḥyah al-Kalbi to the court of Heraclius in Arabia which was located at Ilya.

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[9] Riḍā, *Muḥammad Rasūlullah*, 117; Muhammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *Ḥayāh Muḥammad* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Naḥḍah al-Miṣriyyah, 1963), 163.

At the time when the letter reached Heraclius, it was during the truce of Ḥuḍaybiyah.[10]

The caravan of Abu Sufyan was nearby Heraclius' court when the letter reached Heraclius. He had not embraced Islam at the time when this event took place. Heraclius ordered the caravan to come to the court to ask about Muhammad. He wanted the people of Muhammad's hometown to describe the man who sent him a letter to embrace Islam. Heraclius had questioned Abū Sufyān about Muhammad since the latter was the closest in kinship as compared to the rest of the people among the caravan members. The questions posed, especially in relation to Muhammad's identity as a Prophet and the teachings he preached, were very specific and indicative of Heraclius profound knowledge about the coming of a Prophet based on the description in his Scripture.

Abū Sufyān, despite being hostile to Muḥammad, had to be honest when answering Heraclius' questions to preserve his reputation as a Quraysh leader in front of his caravan members. Thus, all his answers only led to more affirmation of the truth of Muḥammad's identity as a Prophet of Allah. Heraclius then ordered that the Prophet Muhammad's letter was read to him. There was translation process involved in this dialogue to let Heraclius' statements be understood by Abū Sufyān and vice versa, and the letter from the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. be understood by Heraclius.[11]

The contents of Prophet's letter were mainly on inviting the emperor to Islam. In the letter to Heraclius, the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. clearly stated that, "I invite

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[10] The truce was between Muslims and the Quraysh to ceasefire in the year 6th of Hijrah. That situation rendered opportunity for the Prophet to concentrate on spreading his *da'wah* to further locations by all means, including sending the letters to the emperors surrounding Arabia.

[11] Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari*, ḥadīth number 7, 2941 & 4553.

you to Islam". He further selected the verse 64 of sūrah Āli 'Imrān which stated: "O people of the Scripture! Come to a word common to you and us that we worship none other than Allah.." The use of this verse was very powerful since the common ground to worship of the One and Only Creator was established between the two religions.[12]

Reports implied that Heraclius was satisfied with the description by Abū Sufyān about Muhammad, that the latter matched the characteristics of the Prophet mentioned in his Christian Scripture. He even prophecised that Muslims will dominate the whole Arabia and even Byzantine will be subdued. Notwithstanding this acknowledgment, Heraclius chose not to embrace Islam for some reasons.[13]

Friendship between Heraclius and the Prophet Muhammad was formed despite declining Islam. Correspondence took place between the emperor and the Prophet for some time.[14] Heraclius remained a Byzantine emperor until he was defeated by Muslims who were led by Khalīd al-Walīd. Based on historical narratives, Heraclius died as a Christian in 641 A.D.

The Fourth Model: Dialogue between the Prophet and Christians of Najran

During the year 10th of Hijrah (around 633 A.D.), a delegation of about 60 Christians from Najran arrived in the Prophet's mosque in Medina to meet him.[15] The meeting

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[12] Al-Jaburī, "The Prophet's Letter to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius," *Hamdard Islamicus 1*, no. 3 (1978), 36-49.

[13] Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari*, ḥadīth number 7, 2941 & 4553.

[14] Hamidullah, Muhammad, *Majmūʿat al-Wathāiq al-Siyāsiyyāt fī ʿAhd al-Nabawīy wa Khilāfāt al-Rāshidah* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Thaqāfiyyah al-Dīniyyah, 1941), 65.

[15] Muhammad ibn Isḥāq, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah* ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2004), vol. 2, 180; Ibn Qayyim, Zād al-Maʿād, vol. 3, 530; al-Saqā, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah li Ibn Hishām* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-Islāmī al-ʿArabī, 1997), vol. 2, 185.

was preceded by the letter that the Christians received from the Prophet, inviting them to Islam. It was the time when Muslim armies had marched towards Mu'tah and Tabūk and gained victory over Byzantine empire. Christians of Najran, previously being under Byzantine control feared their safety in Arabia because Muslims' power grew strong throughout the land.

When the Christians arrived the mosque, they were left to pray in it, facing the east, in the opposite direction from that of Muslims'.[16] Then, an in-depth dialogue took place between them and the Prophet concerning theological issues. It seemed that the dialogue was difficult to be concluded. The Christians pointed out that Jesus was the son of God. The Prophet emphasized that it was not impossible for Allah to create Jesus without a father as it was not impossible for Him to create Adam directly from clay and without parents that preceded him. Then the Prophet offered them to invoke prayer and let Allah punish the party that was lying.[17]

The Prophet gave them time to think and decide. After a careful deliberation, they declined to accept the idea but conceded that the Prophet decided their fate. The Prophet made a verdict that they shall pay 2000 garments annually to Muslims, in two separate times of the year. That amount of 'tax' imposed at that time was beyond mercy considering Najrān's sources of income from gold, silver and slaves.[18]

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[16] Al-Saqā, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah li Ibn Hishām*, vol. 2, 185.

[17] This process is called *Mubāhalah*, which is mentioned in the Qur'an, 3:61. For further discussion on *Mubāhalah*, see: Muhammad Javad Reza'i & Mahdi Dasht Bozorgi, "A Study of the Verses of *Mubāhalah*", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* II, no. 1 (2009), 69-83.

[18] Ibn Kathīr, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, trans. Trevor le Gassick (Lebanon: The Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilization, 2000), 74.

The Fifth Model: Dialogue between the Prophet and Jews of Yathrib

The Jews of Yathrib, or the city known as Medina after the Muslims' emigration, never welcomed the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims of Mecca to the city. Despite their contempt to Muslims, they needed to ally with two most dominant Medinan Arabian tribes, 'Aws and Khazraj. The Jewish tribes, with Banū Nadhīr, Qaynuqā' and Qurayẓah being the most prominent ones, allied individually to different Arabian tribes; Banū Nadhīr and Qaynuqā' allied with Khazraj, while Banū Qurayẓah allied with 'Aws.

When the Prophet was entrusted to lead Yathrib, he firstly put the fabric of the society in order by outlining a written document known as the Constitution of Medina (CM).[19] CM defined the rights and duties of every

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[19] For the full document of CM, see al-Saqā, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah li Ibn Hishām* (Egypt: Sharikah Maktabah wa Maṭba'ah Muṣṭafā al-Bābā al-Ḥalbā, 1955), vol. 1, 501-504. For a long debate about CM, see: Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh, *The First Written Constitution in the World: An Important Document of the Time of the Holy Prophet* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1968); Julius Wellhausen, "Excursus: Muḥammad's Constitution of Medina," in *Muhammad and the Jews of Medina*, trans. Wolfgang Behn (Freiburg: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1975), 128-138; Uri Rubin, "'The Constitution of Medina': Some Notes", *Studia Islamica*, no. 62 (1985), 5-23; R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework of Enquiry* (Princeton: Prinston University Press, 1991); R.B. Serjeant, "The *Sunnah Jami'ah,* Pacts with the Yathrib Jews and the *Tahrim* of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-Called 'Constitution of Medina'," in *The Life of Muhammad*, ed. Rubin (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998), 151-192; Anver Emon, "Reflections on the 'Constitution of Medina': An Essay on Methodology and Ideology in Islamic Legal History," *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 307-320; Michael Lecker, *The 'Constitution of Medina': Muhammad's First Legal Document* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2004); S. A. Arjomand, "The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad's Acts of Foundation of the *Umma*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 49 (2009), 555-575; Corri Zoli,

component of the diverse Yathrib population which comprised of Jews, Muslims and non-Muslims. Although some writers suggest that Muslims were not the majority in Yathrib, Muslims were, indisputably, the strongest component in the community who held the leadership position. CM stipulated that the duty to defend and secure peace and stability in Yathrib was the responsibility of all its inhabitants. Muslims were obliged to physically protect it by getting involved in the armed forces while the Jews were responsible to provide the financial aid. Treacherous acts, notably that might expose the city to threat and danger were intolerable.

The dialogue between the Prophet Muḥammad p.b.u.h. and Medina Jews started off with openness of the former. On the contrary, the latter, initiated dialogue in a mode to challenge the Prophet's knowledge. It was provocative and most of the time demeaning in nature. Despite that, the Prophet attended them and answered the questions they posed. Narratives on dialogue between the Prophet Muhammad and the Jews of Medina showed that the dialogues between them were frequent and intense.

Besides dialogue and verbal assault, Jews constantly shook the stability of Yathrib by harassing Muslims. Evidence could be seen in the case of Bani Qaynuqā' which stirred up the people for a fight because of insulting a Muslim lady sexually in public, and the public recital of poetry on the clashes between ʿAws and Khazraj, to evoke the bitter memory of conflicts among both tribes. The Prophet Muḥammad p.b.u.h. repeatedly interfered and warned the Jews against their actions that seem destructive for the social unity. When sufficient warnings were

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"The Multicultural Ummah," in *The Sociology of Islam: Secularism, Economy and Politics,* ed. Keskin (U.K.: Ithaca Press, 2011), 129-152; P.L Rose, "Muhammad, The Jews and the Constitution of Medina: Retrieving the Historical Kernel," *Der Islam* vol. 86, no. 1 (2011), 1-29.

responded with more wrongdoings, the Prophet expelled respective Jewish tribe starting with Banū Qaynuqā', followed by Banū Nadhīr who refused to assist at the time when Medina needed their financial contribution at war.

After being expelled, Ḥuyay ibn al-Akhṭab, the leader of Banū Nadhīr consolidated with the Quraysh and few other Arab tribes around Mecca against Medinan Muslims in the Battle of Aḥzāb. Since the battle occurred in Medina, this implied that the whole city was in great danger. Ḥuyay ibn al-Akhṭab broke into the fortress of Banū Qurayẓah in Medina, persuaded their leader, Ka'ab ibn Asad, to join forces and destroy Muslims from within while Quraysh and its alliances launched attack over Medina from the outside. Ka'ab was reluctant at the beginning but Ḥuyay guaranteed him a great victory if coalition were formed, so he eventually complied.

It turned out that Muslims won the battle of Aḥzāb and Banū Qurayẓah who attempted treachery was in big trouble. Fortress of Banū Qurayẓah was besieged for twenty-five days. Banū Qurayẓah had the chance to decide their plan of action. Ka'ab ibn Sa'ad voiced out few suggestions to avoid them from severe punishment and let them save their lives but this Jewish tribe had not reached any consensus. None of the suggestions was taken up. They preferred to be indecisive. Then the Prophet ordered that Sa'ad ibn Mu'āz, 'Aws tribal leader, to decide for the punishment of Banū Qurayẓah. Except those who chose to surrender and embrace Islam, the men among this last Jewish tribe in Medina were executed. Their women and children, with exception of one of them who committed a murder, were made hostages.

The final encounter between the Prophet Muḥammad p.b.u.h. and Arabian Jews was in the Battle of Khaybar. The Jews that fought in this battle were among those who were exiled previously to the outskirts of Medina and formed allegiance with Quraysh and other Arab tribes in the

previous Battle of Aḥzāb. The Jews were defeated in Khaybar once and for all.

The Sixth Model: The Written Dialogue between the Prophet Muhammad and Parvez (Khosrow II) (Sassanian Emperor)

The time when the letter was sent to Parvez (Khosrow II), the Sassanian emperor, was approximately the time when the letter to Heraclius (the third model) was sent. The letter was sent by 'Abd Allāh ibn Hudhāfah and when it reached Parvez, the latter was enraged so he ordered that Muhammad was brought to him immediately. Two messengers were entrusted with bringing the Prophet p.b.u.h. to the emperor. They were from the neighbouring city which was under the rule of Sassanian empire.

The contents of Prophet's letter were consistent with letters to other leaders in inviting them to Islam. The difference was the letter to Parvez was written in a more precise style. There was no need to mention the similarities between Islam and the leader's religion as the Prophet mentioned in the letter to Heraclius. That was perhaps because the religion was not revealed religion which had the same reference points on similarities.

While the two messengers attempted to locate the Prophet p.b.u.h., conveyed Parvez's order to bring the Prophet before the former and began interrogating the Prophet, Parvez had been murdered by his son. The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. who knew about the murder through revelation of Allah informed Parvez's messengers who were in doubt and puzzled about the news.

The distance between Medina and Ctesiphon, where Parvez's palace was located, was far. At that age, it was impossible for a news to travel through such distance within a limited time due to the absence of modern day's devices and communication technology. This had left the two messengers astounded and contemplated. When the news

about Parvez's death reached them, they believed in Muhammad and finally decided to embrace Islam.[20]

Characteristics of the Prophetic Interfaith Dialogue Based on the Six Models

Seven characteristics can be extracted from the models of Prophetic interfaith dialogues. The first characteristic is that all interfaith dialogues are consistently based on the motive of *da'wah*. Second, when the dialogues are carried out and perspectives are exchanged among interlocutors, the main principles (*'aqīdah*) of Islamic teachings remain unchanged and unaltered. Third, all the dialogues started off in openness and respect. Fourth, the messages are conveyed in the dialogues very clearly and precisely, most of the time by stating the points that are familiar to the interlocutors.

Fifth, all dialogues reflect that peaceful co-existence was being preserved among diverse co-inhabitants in the community. Sixth, when controversial and difficult points are brought forth in the dialogue enterprise, they were attended appropriately and dealt with honesty without evasion. Seventh, the interfaith dialogues are attended in full self-confidence that did not entail arrogance. The following paragraphs further elaborate these characteristics.

The First Characteristic: Interfaith Dialogue is *Da'wah*

In all the interactions of the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h., his objective was no other than to invite other people to Allah by practising the teachings of Islam. This was also evident in all his interfaith dialogue activities. The dialogues that he initiated were not based on his self-interest but rather to uphold his responsibility as a messenger of Allah to call his people to worship only Allah.

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[20] Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *'Uyūn al-Athar* (Medina: Dār al-Turāth, 1996), 344-346; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1998), vol. 1, 262-264; Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, 566.

There is a tendency to argue and criticize that *da'wah* and dialogue cannot be mixed.[21] The argument held is *da'wah* should not enter the sphere of dialogue. This idea is merely a result of misconception of what constitutes *da'wah*. *Da'wah*, in fact, comprises every beautiful action, noble character and word of a Muslim that have the capacity to appeal the others to Islam. Therefore, isolating *da'wah* from dialogue means erasing good values and positive qualities from dialogue which is counter-productive to dialogue enterprise.[22] While it is true that the target of *da'wah* is not necessarily 'conversion' but 'effective explanation about Islam',[23] there is also a boundary between calling others to Islam and coercing them to it. Coercion is detrimental and counterproductive if the intention is to invite others to listen, get to know and understand Islam better, then fall in love with the teachings and the Creator of this religion.

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[21] Asghar Ali Engineer, "Da'wah or Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* vol. 39, no. 1-2 (2002), 26-32.

[22] Hammām Sa'īd, *Qawā'id al-Da'wah ila Allāh* (Kuala Lumpur: KITA Publication, 2010), 36, 32. The author elaborates that the caller or *dā'ī* reflects the message that he/she calls for.

[23] Qur'an, 16:35. The effective explanation which makes the others understand the message of Islam is the attraction for them to consider embracing Islam instead of other faiths or ideologies. The verse stated previously, if combined with the verse "…Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation, but He intended to test you in what He has given you.." (5:48) and "Indeed (O Muhammad) you do not guide whom you like, but Allah guides whom He wills.." (28:56) creates the sense of calmness in our mind. The calmness and content which avoids aggression and coercion in *da'wah* but generates the industrious efforts towards effective delivery and constant prayers for the *mad'ū*. In the third principle of *da'wah*, Hammām Sa'īd also outlined that the reward from Allah in performing *da'wah* is attained in the effort of doing it, not based on whether the call is answered (*al-Ajr yaqa' bi mujarrad al-da'wah wa lā yatawaqqaf 'alā al-istijābah*). Sa'īd, *Qawā'id al-Da'wah,* 14.

The Second Characteristic: Principle-Centred

The Prophet Muhammad did not conduct dialogue by compromising the core principles of Islam that relate to the theological issue especially with regards to the Oneness of Allah or *tawḥīd*. He was willing to listen to others' perspectives, understand their point of view and explain the main doctrines of Islam according to the different levels of interlocutors' capacity of intellect. He was also excellent in delivering the most effective explanation about Islam by different methods and styles. However, the main tenets of Islam have never been the subject for negotiation in the name of dialogue. As such, the main Islamic doctrines remain unaltered, stable, firm and never changing.

The point that the Prophet repeatedly tried to convince the delegation of Najrān Christians that Allah is Most Capable to create Jesus without father as He has created Adam without parents was one of the proofs of this characteristic. Similarly, Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib mentioned in the dialogue with al-Aṣḥamah al-Najāshi when he was required to explain about the status of Jesus as a servant of Allah, not God, was a clear proof to justify this character of interfaith dialogue.

Apart from these occasions, there are other events in the life of the Prophet which further justify this characteristic. The first event is related to Muslim migration to Abyssinia, whereby the group returned to Mecca upon learning through rumors that Quraysh leaders embraced Islam. It appeared that the Quraysh leaders who disbelieved also prostrated when they heard the reading of sūrah al-Najm being recited by the Prophet, except Abū Lahab. Those who prostrated then claimed that the Qur'an praised the idols because the chapter mentioned three of their main idols, Lattā, ʿUzzā and Manāt. Because of being embarrassed that they had prostrated for being mesmerized by the beauty of the chapter, they accused that the Prophet

was willing to share in worshiping the idols.[24] This accusation was dismissed firmly that there should be no association to Allah in any aspect.

This was in line with the reason of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) for a chapter in the Qur'an entitled Disbeliever (*al-Kāfirūn)* in which Allah stated, and it means:

> "Say: O ye that reject Faith! I worship not that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. Nor will I worship those whom you have worshipped. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you be your Way, and to me mine."

This chapter contains the order to unify Allah and free oneself from associating Him to anything including the idols and statues or enslaving oneself to other than Him. The reason of its revelation as mentioned by al-Ṭabranī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim from Ibn 'Abbās that the Quraysh leaders offered wealth to the Prophet so that he became the richest man in Mecca, and offered to marry him to the women of Mecca whom he liked as long as he prevent himself from belittling the idols that they worship. If the Prophet did not want to leave them alone, then he should agree to take turn to worship the idol in one year and his God in the other year. Quraysh's offer was rejected firmly through this chapter.[25]

All of the scenes described above justified that one of the central characteristics of Prophetic Interfaith dialogue is principle-centred. The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. was flexible in all other issues but matters of creed and worship were non-negotiable.

The Third Characteristic: Openness and Respect
The simplistic view of the *sīrah* of the Prophet Muhammad might lead a person to assume that he was selective in

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[24] Wahbah al-Zuhayli, *al-Tafsīr al-Munīr,* vol. 14 (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2007), 101.

[25] *Ibid.*, vol. 15, 839-840.

honouring other people. The firm final verdict against Jews might have signalled us to this point. Contrary to this assumption, if one observes all initial stage of dialogues, one will discover that the Prophet was consistently open to the questions and issues of the others. He also interacted with the others respectfully.

This characteristic was vivid in the Prophet's early days in Yathrib when he attended to the Jews and listened to their questions about Islam and religious issues faithfully. He did not dismiss them albeit receiving provocative questions from time to time. If boycott, exile, and other penalties were imposed on a person or a group, that must be preceded by his, her or their own action. The Prophet would only punish those whose misconducts were concretely observed and proven to have occurred. As such, the Prophet's strict treatments towards the Jews were not simply because they were born Jews, but due to their treacherous acts and mischievous deeds that had inflicted the public interest.

Additionally, even before the verdict was made on Banū Qurayẓah, they were left to decide their course of action during the twenty-five-day-siege. This was again the evidence of openness of the Prophet. The value of openness and respect was also obvious when the Prophet p.b.u.h. left Najrān Christians without prohibiting them to pray in his mosque, facing the opposite direction. This did not denote that the different theological doctrine was negotiated to the extent that other religions were valued as having similar validity, at par with Islam -which certainly was not the case. If that was the case, this would nullify the effort to invite them to Islam and explain its doctrine.[26]

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[26] On another note, the permission given to the Christians to pray in the Prophet's mosque was suitable to the context of Medina at that time where the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. was still alive and he was revered as a spiritual leader. Besides, Muslims in the community knew what was going on. If similar permission is granted in this

Respect, as a virtue, manifested in the Prophet's action when he treated others with dignity that they deserve as human beings. The Prophet used the polite expression and spoke with the voice that he did not raise unnecessarily. Besides, he gave ample opportunity for interlocutors to question him on religious matters and he answered the questions faithfully. To allow them to think, he gave ample time for decision making.

The Fourth Characteristic: Clarity and Precision
The Prophet Muḥammad p.b.u.h. communicated the message in the dialogue very clearly. He did not like lengthy and complicated expression that seemed unnecessary in an explanation.[27] He used the simile to make a comparison between two cases. The use of the verse on impossibility of creating Jesus without father and Adam without parents in the dialogue with Najrān Christians was one of the examples.[28] The Prophet also connected the familiar knowledge and experience of the others with the message that he preached as reflected in the letter to Heraclius: "Come to a common word to you and us..".[29]

The Prophet Muhammad was straightforward about the purpose of his communication and preferred direct explanation of a subject. The letter from the Prophet Muhammad to Khosrow was precise. He directly introduced himself as a servant and messenger of Allah, stated the reason of the letter that was to invite Khosrow to Islam and warned him against the consequence of disbelief.

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contemporary day to other religious followers, then it is feared that the problematic idea of religious pluralism is being promoted.

[27] This is in line with a ḥadīth that he p.b.u.h. stated, and its meaning: "Make things easy, do not make them difficult." Al-Bukhari, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, hadith no. 69.

[28] Qur'an, Ali 'Imran 3:59.

[29] Qur'an, Ali 'Imran 3:64.

The Fifth Characteristic: Peaceful Co-existence

This characteristic is reflected notably through the Constitution of Medina (CM) when it started off by mentioning each component of Yathrib -believers, Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib, those who follow them and fight alongside themselves. They all were referred to as one community (*innahum ummatun wāḥidah* or verily they are one community).[30] CM has outlined the roles of every component of Medinan Community, acknowledging the existence of everyone in Medina as a member of the city whose lives were protected and safety guaranteed as long as they were loyal citizens.

CM also stipulated that the members of the covenants protect each other against injustice, corruption, enmity and rebellion, even if the one who committed the act were a person's own son. Prohibition was also stated against assisting the outsiders who attack the city.

The Jews who supported the Muslims shall be equally helped, 'shall not be wronged nor shall his enemies be aided'.[31] Freedom to practice one's religion was expressed through the emphasis that *'lil Yahūd dīnuhum wa lil Muslimīn dīnuhum'* (the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have their religion). Similar characteristic is reflected from the case of Christian Najrān which was not coerced to Islam but be permitted to stay under the protection of Muslims with some form of payment.

The Sixth Characteristic: Non-Evasion

Dialogue with Najāshi indicated very clearly that in facing opposing ideas and controversial issues between two dialogue interlocutors, Ja'far did not escape from addressing it. He singled out the different stance and principle without lying or hiding them. Such actions were

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[30] Al-Saqā, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah li Ibn Hishām,* vol. 1, 502.

[31] *Ibid.*, 504.

also demonstrated in the dialogue between the Prophet and Jews of Medina and between him and the Najrān Christians.

The Seventh Characteristic: Confidence, non-Arrogance

All acts of inviting others to Islam via interfaith dialogues stemmed out from the firm conviction of the validity and superiority of Islam as a revealed religion, designed by the Most Knowing Creator of the whole universe. This conviction generated tranquillity and calmness, reflected a true sense of self-esteem. It neither elicited unnecessary fear of threats nor anxiety which manifested in forms of rudeness or arrogance.

The Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. was polite and modest in his dealings with interlocutors of interfaith dialogues. He did not assume that having appointed as a Messenger of Allah was a permit for him to ridicule or degrade the others who did not know the teachings of Islam. He neither used indecent words nor did he call others with names that displease them. Conversely, he guided others through dialogue which basis was love, affection and mercy. His concern of his people's well-being in the hereafter drove himself for commitment and steadfastness. He conveyed the different ideas, perspectives and stance in interfaith dialogues persuasively.

Conclusion

Six models of the Prophetic interfaith dialogue were dominated by seven characteristics: first, *da'wah* was the purpose that drove the dialogue; second, the Prophet were principle-centred and never compromised the fundamentals of Islam; third, all interfaith dialogues were conducted in openness and respect to the other interlocutors; fourth, the messages were expressed in clarity and precision; fifth, difficult questions or issues were not left unattended by escaping them, and sixth, despite the faith that Islam was/is the only acceptable religion of Allah, the Prophet was not arrogant. It is therefore hoped that these characteristics that

are derived from the models of the Prophetic Interfaith Dialogue can serve as a point of reference for any future Muslim interfaith encounters.

Acknowledgement

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