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Empowering The Values of Civilizational Dialogue: A Survey of Several Selected Issues

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Abstract

The civilisational dialogue concept has long been discussed by the world's society, especially the academia. Hence, the success of assimilating this concept in the inter-civilisation context (Islam, West, China, India etc.) is far from fruition. This qualitative study aimed to investigate several issues pertaining to this concept by using the content analysis method on relevant sources of data. Findings indicate three issues that were discussed, namely the relationship between a dialogue and a debate, interfaith or inter-religious dialogue in the civilisation dialogue concept and sensitive issues in civilisational dialogue are not big issues that can jeopardise the implementation of the civilisation dialogue concept if it is examined and viewed positively and prudently.

Keywords: Civilisational Dialogue, Debate, Interfaith Dialogue, Islam, Sensitive Issues

Introduction

Civilisational dialogue is an international relations concept that is anchored on noble and common values found in societies around the world. The world today, which is filled with fear, unrest, enmity, conflict and death, craves for this concept in order to create a life full of comfort, progress and harmony. However, its implementation is faced with several issues, which, if not examined wisely, could jeopardise solidarity and positive values that are incorporated in the civilisation dialogue concept. This study had discussed several issues in order to obtain the actual picture about civilisation dialogue. Among them is the relationship between a dialogue and a debate, interfaith or interreligious dialogue as a dimension of civilisation dialogue and sensitive issues in civilisational dialogue are not something that can seriously jeopardise the implementation of civilisation dialogue if it is monitored as well as accepted positively and wisely.

Relationship between Dialogue and Debate

Islamic scholars, like 'Abbas Mahjub in *al-Hikmah wa al-Hiwar 'Alaqah Tabaduliyyah* and former Shaykh al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi in *Adab al-Hiwar fi al-Islam*, had related

hiwar with *jidal* (debate) because there is a significant relationship between these two words. The similarity is that both these words denote a form of discussion that aims to describe a viewpoint (Fadlullah, 1987). The only difference is that a debate (*jidal*) is more aggressive and affirmative because it also aims to influence and out-manoeuvre opponents (Kersten, 1997; Christodoulidis, 2011). Nevertheless, it is still presumed to be positive if it prioritises strong arguments, observe ethical guidelines when presenting arguments and respect the truth. Debates (*jidal*) of this nature are part of dialogue (*hiwar*) (Sammarah, 1997).

Dialogue refers to a 'discussion' about a problem or topic between two or more parties with the aim of benefitting both parties (Zaidin et al., 2016). Whereas, debate (*jidal*) from a linguistic aspect refers to extreme enmity or a clash between arguments. According to al-Asfahani, the original meaning of this word refers to an altercation where one person throws his adversary on to the ground (*jadalah*) (al-Asfahani, 2007). Based on *jim*, *dal* and *lam*, there appears a new word 'mujadalah', which has a similar meaning to 'munazarah' (debate) and 'khusumah' (enmity) (Ibn Manzur, 1999). *Jidal*, from a terminology aspect, refers to discussions aimed at achieving success and overcoming the opponent (Rida, 1999), which sometimes evades the question of truth, as it usually happens in munazarah (al-Fayruz n.d.). Based on the discussions above, it can be concluded that a negative *jidal* can lead to enmity, stubbornness and fanaticism, as referred to in verse 13 in Surah al-Ra'd and verse 3 in Surah al-Hajj, meaning:

"The thunder glorifies His praises, as do the angels in awe of Him. He sends thunderbolts, striking with them whoever He wills. Yet they dispute about Allah. And He is tremendous in might".

"Still there are some who dispute about Allah without knowledge, and follow every rebellious devil".

The word '*jidal*' appears 27 times in the al-Qur'an and only a few verses portray *jidal* in a positive light (Sammarah, 2007), such as verse 46 in Surah al-Ankabut and verse 125 in Surah al-Nahl, meaning:

"Do not argue with the People of the Book unless gracefully, except with those of them who act wrongfully. And say, "We believe in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to you. Our God and your God is 'only' One. And to Him we 'fully' submit"

"Invite 'all' to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice, and only debate with them in the best manner. Surely your Lord 'alone' knows best who has strayed from His Way and who is 'rightly' guided"

This shows that it is human nature to use *jidal* for inappropriate purposes. This could be due to the reality faced by Islam during the time of the Prophet s.a.w, whereby Islam was forced to face challenges in the form of perceptions and culture that were ingrained in the Arabic society at that time (Fadlullah, 1987). Islam does not totally reject *jidal* because it is required in certain circumstances, such as for explaining or upholding the truth. Hence, there are several guidelines and ethical principles that should be practiced to ensure *jidal* adheres to religious demands and achieves its aim (Sammarah, 1997). Islamic scholars had termed *jidal*

as an esteemed debate (*jidal mamduh*) and not a reprehensible debate (*jidal madhmum*) (al-Jurjani n.d.) because a dialogue can change into a reprehensible debate if one party aims to champion a discussion by unethical means or to adamantly hold on to one's beliefs without listening to or accepting the views of others (Damrah, 2005; Tantawi, 1997).

Relationship Between Civilizational Dialogue and Inter-Religious Dialogue

Civilisational dialogue is defined as a form of discussion between two or more parties who represent a belief, ideology or view about an issue carried out in an ethical or harmonious situation for achieving mutual good and benefit (Zaidin et al., 2016). This definition clearly shows that interfaith or inter-religious dialogue is one of the dimensions of civilisation dialogue because the characteristics of religion is more specific compared to the general characteristics of a civilisation. This question arises because of the confusion caused by both these words. Some books on interfaith or inter-religious dialogue do not relate it to debates although they do relate it a little with civilisational dialogue. Some examples of these books are *Dialog Antara Agama dari Perspektif al-Qur'an* by Ramli Awang, *Inn al-Din 'ind Allah al-Islam aw Hiwar 'Aqa'idi bayn Muslim wa Nasrani* by Muhammad 'Abd Allah Muhammad, *Muqaddimah 'ila al-Hiwar al-Islami - al-Masihi* by Muhammad al-Sammak and *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue* by W. Montgomery Watt.

Perhaps each of these authors have their own excuse for their actions. However, it is clear that this situation can cause confusion to some readers, especially those inapt in the field of civilisational dialogue. They might presume that civilisational dialogue and inter-religious dialogue are two different disciplines of knowledge. Confusion has clearly occurred concerning the existence of a relationship between the two and if there exist a relationship, what is the form of the relationship.

Based on the definitions adduced earlier, it is clear and accurate that the answer for clearing up the confusion is that inter-religious dialogue is part of a wide and comprehensive civilisational dialogue. From a logical aspect, it can be concluded that each inter-religious dialogue is a civilisational dialogue; however, not all forms of civilisation dialogue is a form of inter-religious dialogue. Since inter-religious dialogue is a branch of civilisation dialogue; hence, it is subject to civilisation dialogue principles that emphasise the consensus of common values and the open acceptance of differing values (Shafiq & Abu Nimer, 2011).

The Position of Sensitive Issues in Civilization Dialogue

The sensitive issues referred here are issues that are presumed to be exclusive and not appropriate to be subjected to a dialogue. Some of these issues are issues that touch on religious and racial sensitivities. Debate was highlighted because of the existence of some quarters who presume that sensitive issues cannot be subjected to a dialogue because it could lead to tensions, which would then contradict with the policies and ethics of a dialogue session. The basis of civilisational dialogue is to prioritise points of similarity (or consensus) and the ethical perspective declares that a dialogue must exist in a harmonious and calm situation.

Nevertheless, from another perspective, this situation will raise a question as to whether sensitive issues can be ever discussed in a civilisation dialogue and will criteria such as these hinder the highlighting of a certain truth. As mentioned earlier, one of the dimensions of

civilisation dialogue is interfaith or inter-religious dialogue. Undeniably, this type of dialogue faces various sensitive issues. For example, the question regarding the divineness of Prophet Jesus a.s. dan the apostleship of Prophet Muhammad SAW, are two issues that usually lead to tensions between Christians and Muslims.

Although this issue is too sensitive to be subjected to a dialogue, however, on the basis of truth, the doors of dialogue cannot be shut forever when discussing issues like this. For those who wish for answers and assurances regarding this issue will feel that they are not accorded the proper space or platform. Rather, a dialogue should be the main platform for relevant parties to meet and adduce their views and arguments (al-Jirari, 2000).

One initiative when faced with sensitive issues is to build a dialogue-oriented society that is open-minded and ethical as well as happy to highlight views and accept criticism. Closing the door to dialogue in efforts to stop or solve certain problems is actually a fallacious concept. Superficially, certain problems (e.g., religious or ethnic) could seem to have been swept under the rug by not having put through a dialogue but in reality, the problems still exist and could even become worse. In certain circumstances where the problem arises again, then, it cannot be appeased anymore and eventually the situation could get out of hand and more difficult to overcome.

Dialogue on sensitive issues can be successful if the two aspects below are given due attention:

1. Ensure that the parties participating in the dialogue are well-versed in the issue to be discussed.
2. Ensure that the parties participating in the dialogue understand the ethics of a dialogue and the reason for taking part in the dialogue is to obtain the truth and not to defeat an opponent (Azizan, 2008).

Developments in information technology of late have reinforced the need for civilisation dialogue on sensitive issues. The world has witnessed the need for humans, either individually or in groups, to obtain answers or the truth to a question or problem (Miqri, 2004; Carroll, 2008). Positive needs such as this should be accepted with an open mind and guided through proper channels. Hence, sensitive issues that involve politics, religion and ethnic background should be solved through ethical dialogues. Thus, if a correct channel is not provided, society will then revert to other channels and this could have negative implications and jeopardise the harmony in a society, country or even the world (Miqri, 2004).

This matter requires serious attention because if civilisation dialogue concerning sensitive issues cannot be implemented, then it will be seen as pure rhetoric and universal in nature. This study had consulted a professor from a local university about his views on issues pertaining to civilisation dialogue practiced in this country. His response was rather surprising but there was some truth in it. He alleged that civilisation dialogues only focus on commonly agreed upon issues such as social ills, environmental pollution and others that have a desired effect because sensitive issues that are not consensus-based tend to lead to conflicts and crises, both at the national and international levels. In Malaysia, for example, ethnic or religious issues as well as suggestions to form the IFC (*Inter-faith Committee*) should be reviewed in order to improve pertinent weaknesses and drawbacks.

In summary, agreed-upon issues should act as a catalyst or an instigator to civilisation dialogue. A good initiative (or consensus-based issue) usually leads to a desired end. However, it must be emphasised here that sensitive or non-agreeable issues should be in the agenda of a civilisation dialogue because it involves common interests and supports aspirations to uphold the truth. It should be asserted that civilisation dialogue is not a platform for determining who wins or losses in a dialogue but rather, it is a platform for stating and defending the truth. As to whether the truth is accepted or rejected is for the audience to use their rationality and wisdom to evaluate and then make a decision on which view or argument is more concrete and/or convincing.

Conclusion

Discussion of the issues above show how important it is for the civilisation dialogue concept to be appreciated and implemented in an individual's life and the actual socialising between humans or even civilisations. The world will not be a harmonious place neither can it serve human needs as long as humans do not seriously practice the civilisation dialogue concept in their daily lives.

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