

DIALOGUE OF CIVILISATION: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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1. Introduction

To the 1.9 billion Muslims in the world today, the *Quran* and *Hadiths* are the most crucial sources of knowledge regarding their religion. In these sources, interfaith/cultural/civilisational dialogue is very much emphasized. It is perhaps unfortunate that despite the importance that Islam places on dialogue, many, beginning with Muslims themselves, do not know the body of teachings and literature concerning it. This subject is now growing very fast in its importance, especially after the unfortunate event of 9/11 as well as Samuel Huntington's theory of 'the clash of civilisations.'¹ As a response to these events, Muslims have initiated and participated in inter-civilisational dialogue at many different levels and in many different forms all over the world in the past 10 years.²

Generally, the *Quran* (first documented in the 6th century AD) already foresaw the rise of the issues surrounding the diversity and plurality of cultural and faith systems in the world, which in this globalised and globalising and post-modern era, has become the focus of global

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¹Osman Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue: Interpreting A Divine Message For Twentieth Century Humanity*, Kuala Lumpur: IITM and ISUGU, 2006, 1.

²Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue*, 1.

discourses and debates, as deemed from the pronouncement of the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of the Dialogue of Civilisation which was actually spurred by the Islamic Symposium on Dialogue Among Civilisations held in Tehran, Iran in May 1999.³

Dialogue was an important issue during the Prophet's days because of the context of 'pluralism' amongst the tribes of the Arabs.⁴ The need for dialogue was also important because as the prophet of what was then perceived to be a 'new religion', he had to face the challenges and questionings of Christians and Jews. To Muslims, Islam is only a continuation of the earlier faith systems that came before it.

It can perhaps be argued also that in its historical development, the rise and development of the 'Islamic Civilisation,' which via Andalusia reached Eastern Europe in the West and China in the East, was to a certain degree due to the dialogical frame of mind that laced the early Muslim outlook in their encounter with others. To begin with, the *Quran* reminds Muslims and others who may want to share the same idea that: "The original pair of male and female (Adam and Eve), God had created human beings into different nations and tribes, so that they may get to know one another (not so that they may hate each other); and that the best amongst mankind in the eyes of God are those who are best in their conduct/works/deeds and that God indeed knows who are the best in *taqwa* (close) to Him."⁵

2. *Quranic* References to Dialogue with the 'People of the Book'

One of the earliest references to dialogue begins with the following verse:

Say: 'O People of the Book! Come here for a word which is common between you and us: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than God.' If they turn back, you say: 'Bear witness that we are Muslims.'⁶

Khalid Duran argues that the statement "come here for a word which is in common between you and us" actually gives a meaning of dialogue (word

³Azizan Baharuddin, *Islam dan Dialog Peradaban: Satu Perspektif* (Islam and Civilisational Dialogue: An Islamic Perspective), Kuala Lumpur: CCD, University of Malaya, 2005, 7.

⁴Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue*, 3.

⁵Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Quran* (New Edition with revised translation and commentary), Brentwood: Amena Corporation, 1989, 3.

⁶*Quran*, Chapter 3 (The Family of Imran) Verse 64.

between = *dia-logos* = conversation partners).⁷ It also means “come to a dialogue with us on a common platform”. In the context of its time, the verse perhaps was referring more specifically to the ‘people of the book’. Its implication and use would/could be more wide and general today.

The *Quran* encourages dialogue:

Invite (all) to the way of the Lord with wisdom and beautiful discourses; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for your Lord knows best who have strayed from His path and who receives guidance.⁸

The above verse supports dialogue as the means to inform those who are not Muslims (believers in God or not) of the *Quran*’s view on various issues. Arguing with others must be done in a pleading and gracious manner, and the arguments must be good (logical, not hurtful to others, etc.). (We will later consider the *adab*/etiquette of dialogue.) When it is intended, not only for dialogue with or among believers, the verse can also be understood to invite or encourage dialogue of civilisations (instead of/amongst those with religious faith). That the plurality of human beings is a divine condition in itself is stated by the *Quran*:

If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you; so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute.⁹

3. The Medina Constitution and the Plural Community

Drawn up in 622 AD by Muhammad, the Medina Constitution¹⁰ was the first one of its kind. What is important is that it guarantees the rights of minority non-Muslims in Muslim society. The Medina Society was plural in the sense that it had besides the Muslims, substantial non-Muslim communities such as the Jews, Christians, Arab tribes and Sabians. Even the Arabs were not a homogenous group as they were made up of many tribes who were distinct from each other. In the Malaysian context,

⁷Khalid Duran, *The Drafting of A Global Ethics: A Muslim Perspective*, Global Dialogue Institute, 1998, quoted in Bakar. *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue*, 5.

⁸*Quran*, Chapter 16 (The Bee) Verse 125.

⁹*Quran*, Chapter 5 (The Repast) Verse 48.

¹⁰Medina Constitution, http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/con_medina.htm, accessed May 13, 2008.

plurality is a fact of life, and it affects the life of Malaysians both historically and in the contemporary period. Presently, there are more than 100 indigenous groups, Chinese, Indians, Malays & even European communities coexisting together. In Malaysia too, Muslims and non-Muslims are continuously in dialogue with one another especially in a world that is increasingly becoming plural.¹¹ Malaysia is a 50 year old nation with the Malays (who are the majority and Muslims), Chinese, Indians and indigenous groups living together since a millennium ago at least. Since the Prophet's time, the Islamic perspective vis-à-vis a plural society was an inclusive one. The 2nd and 25th articles of the Constitution of Medina, "Verily the (non-Muslims) constitute a political unit (*ummah*) distinct from all the other people (of the world). And the Jews of the *Banu Aufa* shall be considered as a community (*ummah*) along with the believers (Muslims) (even if), for the Jews their religion and for the Muslims their religion", mirror this inclusiveness.

4. Three Forms of Extreme Positions

In the spirit of dialogue in a plural society, Muslims are asked not to take on 3 extreme modes/positions in their implementation of laws and governances. These 3 forms are:

1. Extremist position whereby the limits of balance are overstepped in one's endeavour to carry out certain procedures or regulations.
2. Chauvinism or *ta'sub*. In this situation, one's position is that one's own group is the best, the most true, and that any 'ideas' or 'ways' of others are all false and must be destroyed at all costs.
3. Fanaticism (which is close to psychosis) is a position/action taken on the premise of one's own understanding only, without regard to objectivity and the possible relevance of the opinion of others.¹²

The *Quran*'s view on these negative predispositions is very clear:

... if anyone slew a person unless it is for murder or for doing mischief in the land, it would be as if he slew the whole people. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people...¹³

¹¹There are various types of dialogue, one of which is the 'dialogue of life' through which different groups interact whilst undergoing their life's activities.

¹²Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue*, 3.

¹³*Quran*, Chapter 5 (The Repast) Verse 32.

Killing of each other is a very serious offense and according to the verse, killing of one man is equal to killing the whole community.

5. Guidance in Dialogue

The following verses provide further and could perhaps be seen to be the basis of the ethics of dialogue. Principles of balance, cooperation in the doing of good, justice, humility, patience are especially emphasised.

Thus have We made of you an *ummah* justly balanced, that ye might be witness over the nations, and the messenger a witness over yourselves.¹⁴

Help ye one another in righteousness and in piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour...¹⁵

Oh ye who believe I stand out firmly for justice as witness to Allah even as against yourselves, your parents, or your kin, and whether it is (against) rich or poor... if you distort justice or decline to do justice... Allah is well acquainted with all that you do.¹⁶

And the servants of the Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility and when the ignorant address them, say ‘peace’.¹⁷

5. The Concept of Civilisation in Islam

Before we embark on the idea of the dialogue of civilisation, perhaps it is useful to understand the concept of civilisation in the Islamic perspective. Three central ideas underlie the Islamic theory of civilisation: religion (*deen*), religious community (*ummah*), and the city (*madinah*), as the centre of urban civilisation; of which the city of the Prophet was the first and the model. If we study the *Quran*, it is clear that every civilisation is basically the product of the dynamic interactions of these three elements. As explained by Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) it is interesting to note that Islam was primarily an urban phenomenon from its very beginning. It was in the Medinah urban setting that the Islamic civilisation arose; that is where, what Ibn Khaldun called *umran hadari* (urban civilisation) grew its roots. Further as explained by the *Hujurat* Verse (referring to different ‘nations’ and ‘tribes’) the *Quran* affirms that humankind has been destined to live in a world split up into a multitude of *ummahs* and civilisations. But

¹⁴*Quran*, Chapter 2 (The Heifer/The Cow) Verse 143.

¹⁵*Quran*, Chapter 5 (The Repast) Verse 2.

¹⁶*Quran*, Chapter 4 (The Women) Verse 135.

¹⁷*Quran*, Chapter 25 (The Criterion) Verse 63.

can peace reign amongst these different and diverse civilisations? In this regard, the *Quran* provides fundamental guidelines for the enhancement of mutual acceptance among civilisations.

6. Why the Necessity for Dialogue?

In the words of Leonard Swidler, ‘a world with clashing or potentially clashing cultural, religious, ethnic groups is the world of the beginning of the 3rd millennium.’¹⁸ Dialogues of faiths and civilisations are necessary, because different faiths and different civilisations have different world-views, and sometimes contradictory philosophical standpoints on the various issues facing humankind. Religions and civilisations may use also different ways of solving these problems. However, there are certain facts about our world that we have to admit and confront with honesty and commitment together, if peace is to prevail.

As stated in the preamble of the Earth Charter:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.¹⁹

More often than not, humankind has failed to live as responsible world citizens in line with the diverse and plural character of the global community. First, we must overcome our ignorance of one another. We need to understand what are our similarities and differences after which there needs to be mutual respect, despite the differences. Once this is done, as the Earth Charter says, there is much work to be done vis-à-vis the environmental crisis and the crisis regarding the meaning of human existence amongst others. Throughout this exercise, dialogue is the only mechanism. Dialogue is antithetical to the clash of civilisation. It is

¹⁸L. Swidler, *Dialogue in Malaysia and the Global Scenario*, Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, 2003, 1.

¹⁹The Earth Charter, <http://www.earthcharter.org>

inevitable and through it cultures and religions can look forward to a process of healing of the deep problems that inhere in many aspects of modern culture, threatening our survival.²⁰ To the *Quran*, dialogue is a necessity in all conditions. It is a virtue and an ideal to be pursued. What are some of the critical issues faced by humanity?

Dialogue is critical today because of issues such as the question of ethics/values with regard to knowledge such as biotechnology in science and technology; in business and in economics, in politics, etc. Together with other scriptures, the *Quran* calls on humankind to revere God who had created this beautiful planet Earth for all of us to share, and for us to develop and cultivate in ourselves a God-consciousness.

O humankind! Adore your Lord, Who has created you and those before you, so that you may attain God-consciousness; Who has made the earth a resting-place for you and the sky a canopy; and caused water to pour down from the sky, thereby producing fruits as food for you. And do not set up rivals to God when you know (better).²¹

Another important subject that should be a focus of dialogue is the issue of the breakdown of the family institution and family values. Many communities face common threats to this institution and dialogue promotes the sharing of mutual concerns and strategies for facing and solving the problem.

The *Quran* is interested in inviting the whole of humankind to dialogue on family institutions and values, as it seeks to reaffirm, again and again, the idea of the common good (*al-khayra*).²² It is for the sake of the common good of all religions and civilisations that traditional family institutions and values should be preserved and protected at all costs. Again the notion of the ‘common good’ is very much in tune with the philosophy of the Earth Charter.

The *Quran* is also interested in dialogues among all peoples, because it also wants to remind everyone that its teachings are not just for the benefits of Arabs and Muslims, but is also meant for everyone:

O humankind! The Apostle hath come to you in truth from God: believe in him, it is best for you. But if you reject faith, to God

²⁰Swidler, *Dialogue in Malaysia and the Global Scenario*, 1.

²¹*Quran*, Chapter 2 (The Heifer/The Cow) Verse 21-22.

²²Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue*, 14.

belong all things in the heavens and on earth; and God is All-knowing, All-wise.²³

Muslims also feel that dialogue is critical in their context because they want to share what they perceive to be the divine fact and wisdom of human pluralism and diversity that characterizes our global community as acknowledged and reminded by the Earth Charter.²⁴ Communities who have this understanding are more likely to celebrate pluralism and diversity. The *Quran* stresses that “mutual acquaintance, recognition and understanding” among the different ethnic groups and nations should be the result of this wisdom.²⁵ In another verse, the *Quran* explains how despite the differences among the different groups, humanity is united in its goal in the striving for the good.

... To each among you, have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His Plan is) to test you in what He had given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute.²⁶

The Creator could have made all human beings members of one single ethnic group and one single religious community. But pluralism and diversity in human society, as in the non-human realms of creation, seems to be the preferred pattern of creation.

In the Islamic perspective, therefore, plurality and diversity is part of the theological framework. God is affirmed as the transcendent source of plurality and diversity in both the natural and the human orders. The spiritual and moral purpose of human plurality and diversity is mutual recognition and mutual understanding (of each other) in the Name of God. An important theme in Islamic pluralism is the idea of unity in diversity, which in fact, characterizes every domain of creation. In the natural realm, this is exemplified by the concept of ecology for example. On the human plane, all evidence seems to point today (as indicated by the Earth Charter) that man should strive for unity in diversity in his quest for sustaining civilisation in the future.

Dialogue can be seen to be an important catalyst in the human endeavour to know one another; to cooperate despite differences and to

²³ *Quran*, Chapter 4 (The Women) Verse 170.

²⁴ The Earth Charter, <http://www.earthcharter.org>, accessed May 13th, 2008.

²⁵ *Quran*, Chapter 49 (The Chambers) verse 13

²⁶ *Quran*, Chapter 5 (The Table Spread) Verse 48.

compete for excellence. What is being emphasized by the *Quran* is that this excellence must be elevated to become universal in moral terms. Important as blood, skin, and ancestry may be, they should not conflict with values such as justice. As Osman Bakar puts it, the idea of religious diversity is to serve a certain divine purpose, namely, “to create a favourable condition for followers of the different religions to ‘strive as in a race’ in the inculcation of virtues and moral excellence.”²⁷

Muslims are asked to be ‘the community of the middle path’ (*ummatah wasatan*) or the ‘moderate community’. “Thus have We made of you an *ummah* (community) justly balanced, that you might be witness over the nations, and the Apostle a witness over yourselves.”²⁸ To be ‘witnesses over the nations’ means to be a community that strives to be a shining example to the rest of the world in the practice of moderation, justice, and equilibrium. However, what is dominant currently is malaise; the *ummah* has lost many, if not all, of the excellent attributes of the middle path community. In consequence, Muslims today can hardly be seen to be able to perform a global role as ‘witnesses over the nations’. Nevertheless, the idea of the *ummatah wasatan*, has been set as the benchmark of a decent global community that should be aspired for. Muslims today are duty bound to be engaged in the global dialogue amongst faiths and civilisations. Such participations would not only help them to be more conscious of the gap between the *Quranic* ideal and the current state of the *ummah* that needs to be narrowed down but also allow them to contribute in the promotion of the Earth Charter as well as narrow the gap between the Islamic World and the West.

7. The Goals of Dialogues of Faiths and Civilisations

Dialogue of religions and of civilisations is to remind ourselves of the basic truth of humankind’s unity, and then to create opportunities for all members of the global community to cooperate and collaborate in various kinds of activities for the common good. This quest for the common good of all has been clearly spelt out by the *Quran*:

To each is a goal to which God turns him; then strive together (as in a race) towards all that is good (*al-khayrat*). Wherever you are, God will bring you together. For God has power over all things.²⁹

²⁷Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue*, 18.

²⁸*Quran*, Chapter 2 (The Heifer/The Cow) Verse 143.

²⁹*Quran*, Chapter 2 (The Heifer/The Cow) Verse 148.

The *Quranic* pursuit of the common good is not limited to the production of positive and good things that are generally recognized by human beings to be right, good and useful: what the *Quran* repeatedly calls enjoining what is right and good (*amr bi'l-ma'ruf*);³⁰ and the rejection of things that human beings generally see as morally wrong, destructive and harmful (*nahy 'anil-munkar*).³¹

Under the *Quranic* category of *ma'ruf*, we may refer to the universal goods commonly desired by all nations such as universal education, kindness, tolerance, charity, global security, international peace and order, socio-economic justice, protection of the environment, and state policies ensuring adequate supplies of food and energy etc. The category of *munkar* embraces the 'common vices' of human societies, such as corruption, oppression, prostitution, drugs, use of weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism and all other acts that pose a threat to human life and civilisation, such as environmental pollution.³²

The list of things that are considered by all nations to be right, good or useful, and those that they consider as wrong, evil or destructive, is likely to grow with time as the space of our common human civilisation broadens. As our common interests and our common challenges multiply, it is imperative for the global community to intensify its pursuit of dialogues of civilisations with the aim of identifying priorities for our collective action, in terms of fostering *ma'ruf*, or eradicating *munkar*.³³

Before dialogue can get well on its way, we need to enhance mutual understanding already existing among peoples of diverse beliefs and cultures. We may conceive of this mutual understanding as ranging from having knowledge of our respective physical characteristics at its lowest level, like skin colour, to knowledge of our common humanity which is spiritual in nature. We also need to have mutual understandings at the levels of knowledge of manners and customs, and of the higher aspects of culture and civilisation. This mutual acquaintance and understanding, if progressively pursued from the lowest to the highest levels, should lead us to a better appreciation of our similarities and differences, as well as the oneness of the human family. The higher purpose of ethnic diversity and pluralism is so that all ethnic and racial groups can finally come to

³⁰*Quran*, Chapter 3 (The Family of Imran) Verse 104 and 110.

³¹*Quran*, Chapter 3 (The Family of Imran) Verse 104 and 110.

³²Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue*, 22.

³³Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue*, 22.

recognize and acknowledge their common humanity. Without this recognition and acknowledgment, the pursuit of human solidarity and brotherhood on earth would not be possible.

8. Ground Rules for Inter-Religious, Inter-Ideological Dialogue

Dialogue is a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that she/he can change and grow. This very definition of dialogue embodies the first commandment of dialogue. In the religious-ideological sphere in the past, people came together to discuss with those differing from them, either to defeat an opponent, or to learn about an opponent so as to deal more effectively with them, or at best to negotiate with them. If people faced each other at all, it was in confrontation sometimes more openly polemically, sometimes more subtly so, but always with the ultimate goal of defeating each other, because of the conviction that each party alone had the absolute truth.³⁴ Dialogue is not debate, each partner must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as he can in an attempt to understand the other's position as precisely and, as much from within, as possible. The following rules are not theoretical rules, or commandments given from above, but ones that have been learned from experience.³⁵

First Commandment: The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly. We enter into dialogue so that we can learn, change, and grow, not that we can force change others, as one hopes to do in debate.

Second Commandment: Inter-religious, inter-ideological dialogue must be a two-sided project within each religious or ideological community and between religious or ideological communities. Because of the corporate nature of inter-religious dialogue, and since the primary goal of dialogue is that each partner learn and change himself, it is also necessary that each participant enter into dialogue not only with his partner across the faith for example, but also with his co-religionists.

Third Commandment: Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity. It should be made clear in what direction

³⁴Swidler, *Dialogue in Malaysia and the Global Scenario*, 77.

³⁵Swidler, *Dialogue in Malaysia and the Global Scenario*, 77-80.

the major and minor thrusts of the tradition move, what the future shifts might be, and, if necessary, where the participant has difficulties with her own tradition. No false fronts have any place in dialogue. Conversely each participant must assume a similar complete honesty and sincerity in the other partners.

Fourth Commandment: In inter-religious, inter-ideological dialogue we must not compare our ideals with our partner's practice, but rather our practice with our partner's practice.

Fifth Commandment: Each participant must define himself; only the Jew, can define what it means to be a Jew, for example. The rest can only describe what it looks like from the outside.

Sixth Commandment: Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are. Rather, each partner should not only listen to the other partner with openness and sympathy but also attempt to agree with the dialogue partner as far as is possible while still maintaining integrity with his own tradition; where he cannot agree further without violating his own integrity.

Seventh Commandment: Dialogue can take place only between equals. Both must come to learn from each other.

Eighth Commandment: Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust.

Ninth Commandment: Persons entering into inter-religious, inter-ideological dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own interpretation of their traditions.

Tenth Commandment: Each participant must attempt to understand the partner's perception and experience of his religion or ideology from within; for a religion or ideology is not merely something of the head, but also of the spirit, heart, and whole being, individual and communal.

9. Obstacles to Dialogue

One important obstacle to dialogue is the exclusivistic attitude. It is normal for anyone to be born 'multiculturally illiterate'. 'Knowledge of others' has to be acquired with the admission that one needs to know to begin with. Feelings/perceptions that only one's group possesses truth needs to be managed, especially when in dialogue with others. Another obstacle is the fear of conversion; i.e., dialogue is not greeted with enthusiasm as there is a danger of one becoming converted into the worldview or faith of the dialogue partner. This situation is also related to another inconvenience

in that when one offers to enter into dialogue, there is also the fear that one's co-religionists will not understand and might look suspiciously at the effort; a 'dilution of faith' is also seen to be a possible outcome. Other factors that can also discourage dialogue is 'defensiveness' which arises because one is concerned that one is not able to 'defend' one's position/religion properly because of factors such as lack of knowledge or lack of skills in articulating one's position. This factor is of course linked with the possibility of becoming 'embarrassed' when one is seen to have failed one's group in the dialogue concerned.

10. Malaysia: A Multicultural and Religious Society

Malaysia is a modern and progressive Muslim country in South-East Asia. It is a multicultural and religious country in which there are three major ethnics: the Malays form the majority of Malaysian population, the Chinese and the Indians. There are another 30 ethnic minorities and most of these minorities reside in the Eastern part of the Malaysian Peninsular. Malaysian Constitution provides that Malay is the official language and Islam the official religion in Malaysia. But other religions are free to be practiced without any harm and discrimination. The Constitution, however, limits the freedom of religion in terms of prohibition of other religions propagating to Islam.

Historically, Hindu influences and beliefs that were long rooted in Malay Peninsula lost its influence with the coming of Islam.³⁶ There have been several theories about the coming of Islam by local and British historians based on proofs and historical findings such as gravestones and several social activities. Historians have conflicting views not only on the exact date of the coming of Islam but also the origins of those who first introduced Islam to the Malay Peninsula. Even though there is not enough historical evidence, which shows the beginning of Islam in the Nusantara region in the 7th century, Malay Peninsula was one of the first countries that accepted Islam, and eventually, Islam spread widely around the 13th century. Apart from that, theories that have often been debated are those

³⁶Details on this see Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib, "Preliminary Statement on a General Theory the Islamization of the Malay Indonesian Archipelago," Paper presented at Persidangan Antarabangsa Mengenai Tamadun Melayu, Kuala Lumpur on 11-13 November 1986 at 24; Hall, D. G. E., *A History of South-East Asia*, 3rd ed., London: McMillan, 1968, 206.

from Harrison, De Jong and also, Marrison who stated that Islam in the Malay Peninsula originated from India.

They coincide the coming of Islam to the Federation of Malaya with the coming of Islam to Sumatra and Java. Gujrati traders from India came to trade in the Malay Archipelago and introduced Islam to Sumatra and Java. However, according to local historian, Syed Naquib al-Attas, Islam came to the Malaya Peninsula through the Arabs. He put forward this theory on the basis that the Arabic language had highly influenced the Malays in language and culture. The coming of Islam has brought about an important effect on almost the whole life of the Malay society. Malay life was transformed from belief in Hinduism and *animisme* to a life based on the teachings of Islam. This can be seen from certain fields such as culture, literature, faith, politics, customs, ceremonies, arts and law.³⁷

After the coming of Islam to Malacca, Hukum Kanun Melaka (HKM), the oldest existing legal document in Malay Peninsula was considered as important written legal document especially when it proved that the lives of the Malays at that time were based on the administration that combined the *Adat Laws* (customary law) and Islamic Law. According to Liaw Yock Fang, the HKM contains influences from Islam, Hinduism and the Malay customs. It is not surprising, therefore, to be able to observe Hindu influences in the HKM because Hinduism had stepped in the Malay Peninsula long before Islam. Even though belief in animation and the Hindu influence were slowly diminishing with the coming of Islam, Hindu influence could still be seen in the HKM. The HKM was not only recognized as a historical document but also as the first written legal document that existed in the Malacca administration.³⁸ British administrators such as Sir Stamford Raffles, W. E. Maxwell, R. J. Wilkinson and T. J. Newbold discovered that the HKM was used primarily during the golden age of the Malacca civilisation, which was a period where Malacca flourished as an entry port in the 14th century.³⁹ Therefore, it was not possible for such a famous centre of trade during that era not to

³⁷Ismail Hamid, *Masyarakat dan Budaya Melayu*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1988, 60.

³⁸Muhammad Yusuff Hashim, *Kesultanan Melayu Melaka: Kajian Beberapa Aspek Tentang Melaka pada abad ke-15 dan abad ke-16 dalam Sejarah Malaysia*, 219 and also See Ryan, N. J., *The Cultural Heritage of Malaya*, Malaysia: Longman, 1971, 15.

³⁹Muhammad Yusuff Hashim, *Kesultanan Melayu Melaka*, 15.

have a system of laws that could provide peace to the local inhabitants and traders who came to visit for their trading purposes. As a centre of trade, Malacca had definitely become the meeting place for culture and civilisation. Several dialects were spoken and the inhabitants were estimated to be approximately 190,000 people. The law did not only provide for trade, but also covered various procedures on the way of life of the Malays at that time.⁴⁰ Since the HKM had the influence of Islam, many Malaysian legal historians have argued that Islamic Law was the legal system, which was applied in those days.⁴¹

In the 18th century, Malay Peninsula was occupied by the British. Malay rulers / sultans had signed several political treaties with the British administrators.⁴² The Malay rulers had to accept a British resident as a British Advisor and adhere to the Advisor's instruction in all matters relating to the administration of the country except matters relating to local custom and Islamic Law. The matters, which include Islamic Law and customs, were pertaining to family, inheritance and *waqf*. Other aspects of Islamic Law such as crime, procedures, contract, land and evidence were taken from those in India. Ahmad Ibrahim has rightly pointed out that the effect of legislation was to replace the former Muslim laws by enactments based on the principles of English Law.⁴³ The British did not involve themselves in the matters of the family institution as it involved the personal lives of the locals.⁴⁴

During the British colonization, Chinese and Indians from mainland China and India immigrated to the Malay Peninsula to work as labour force in the mining industry and agricultural plantation.⁴⁵ The immigration of Chinese and the Indians led to a rapid increase in the total population of Peninsular Malaysia. The influx of Chinese and Indian labour transformed

⁴⁰ Andaya, B. W. and Andaya, L. Y., *A History of Malaysia*, 44.

⁴¹ Ahmad Mohamed Ibrahim and Ahilemah Joned, *The Malaysian Legal System*, 2nd ed., Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1995, 45.

⁴² See Ahmad Ibrahim, *Towards a History of Law in Malaysia and Singapore*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992, 19.

⁴³ Ahmad Ibrahim and Ahilemah Joned, *The Malaysian Legal System*, 22-23.

⁴⁴ See Hooker, M. B., *Islamic Law in South-East Asia*, 95; Ahmad Ibrahim and Ahilemah Joned, *The Malaysian Legal System*, 20.

⁴⁵ Gavin W. Jones and Manjit S. Sidhu, “Population Growth in Peninsular Malaysia,” in Manjit S. Sidhu and Gavin W. Jones, eds., *Population Dynamics in a Plural Society: Peninsular Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: UMCB Publications, 1981, 29.

the Malay Peninsula into a plural society. With this scenario Malaysia then became a multi racial and multi religious society.

11. Dialogue of Civilisation: An Experience

A country that is pluralistic in nature, where many races, religions, ethnicities and cultures co-exist, harmony is essential in ensuring peace and prosperity. Hence, dialogue plays an important role in fostering the understanding and tolerance within the diversified community. For example in Malaysia, several non-governmental organisations has initiated several sessions of dialogue which mainly focuses on interfaith dialogues.

In 1969, the Roman Catholic Church has established The Bishop's Institute of Inter-religious Affairs (BITRA). Later in 1983, the Malaysian Consultative Council for the Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs – MCCBHS is established. The council made up of devotees s of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism. However, Islam wasn't included in this alliance. Instead, the Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN) which aims in unifying several Islamic NGOs has been established in the year 2006.

Before ACCIN came into existence, there were already several Islamic NGO's which were actively involved in dialogues. Amongst others is the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM). In October 1998, ABIM armed with the theme "Partners of People of Other Faiths" has participated in a dialogue of seminar series organised by the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA).

Although the dialogue activity *per se* has not found a place in the affairs of the society, civilisational dialogue was part of the intellectual agenda. The University of Malaya Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (UMCCD) was established in 1996. The establishment of the centre has come to prove that dialogue is not only a charitable affair, which is organised by the NGOs but also a societal agenda that can be promoted through the academic approach.

12. The University of Malaya Centre for Civilisational Dialogue

The setting up of the centre, just before Samuel P. Huntington published his thesis of the 'Clash of Civilisation,' was because of the fact that dialogue of civilisation was fast becoming a much needed mechanism for discoursing issues that arise from the inevitable encounter between nations, ethnic groups, faith systems, ideologies, worldviews and cultures. The expansion of globalisation spurred by the rapid developments of

science and technology is one of the main forces behind this reality. Looking at civilisation not merely in the context of the past, the centre’s main focus is on the articulation of values that may be the basis of a common platform for the solving of issues and problems universally encountered across and within cultures and civilisations. The centre has successfully organised a great number of workshops and conferences locally and internationally as well as run resident and visiting research fellowship programmers for scholars locally and internationally. The centre also acts as a reference point as well as serves on consultative basis in many government and non-government organisations locally and abroad. It has published widely on many topics pertaining to the dialogue of civilisations as well as provided supervision for scores of local and international postgraduates.

To date, the centre has published 4 volumes of KATHA – The Official Journal for Centre for Civilisational Dialogue beginning 2004, 1 volume of *Jurnal Peradaban-Jurnal Rasmi Pusat Dialog Peradaban* (Malay language used), 3 proceedings, 18 monographs and 19 books. Since 2001, the centre has conducted 14 international conferences; 64 national seminars, dialogues and workshops; and nearly 71 public lectures. Since 2003, the centre has hosted 36 visiting scholars. Important is also the networking with the local and international agencies. Currently the centre does consultation work with the Ministry of Education; Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Department of National Unity, Malaysian National UNESCO Commission, etc. The centre sits on various committees that are relevant in policy making. In terms of research and publication the main focus areas at the moment are values, education, and moral empowerment, establishment of National Bioethics Committee, Guideline for Environmental Ethics Based on Religion. Furthermore, the centre also concentrates on various Asian civilisations, such as the Islamic, Chinese, Indian and Japanese civilisation.

One of the latest programmes is the Dialogue of Life. The dialogue was entitled “*Dialog Kehidupan*” or Dialogue of Life and it serves as a platform for people of different religious background to dialogue on current issues faced by society. The aim of the dialogue was to allow the sharing of experiences and perspectives on the custom/culture/belief of the dialoguers in finding the best answers and solutions for some of problems and challenges that are being faced vis-à-vis the encounter of different faith systems in the Malaysian society. This dialogue was jointly organised

by the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, and the Department of Unity and National Integration, both members of the National Commission for UNESCO Malaysia. The objectives are 1) To find solutions to sensitive issues raised by religious groups, 2) To enable representatives of different religions to have better understanding on issues that may be the cause of the misunderstandings, and 3) To be a platform/forum that brings religious leaders together in unity in order to allow them to have discussion and better understanding of other religions. This dialogue is the first intercultural dialogue of its kind that involves groups of different ethnicities and faith backgrounds. It was carried out based on the ethics of dialogue of mutual respect. It succeeded in breaking down stereo-typed racial / religious misunderstandings.⁴⁶

13. Conclusion

It is obvious that dialogue of civilisation is critically needed today. Although much violence has marked the beginning of the third millennium, the age of dialogue as opposed to monologue is here to stay. Efforts such as indicated by the Earth Charter, the Alliance of Civilisation, ISESCO (Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) and the centres of dialogue such as to be found at the University of Szczecin and the University of Malaya, have much to do in terms of promoting mutual understanding and cooperation towards the enhancement and sustainability of civilisation in the future.

⁴⁶“Interreligious Dialogue on Current Issues-Dialogue of Life,” Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, Bulletin No. 8, 2008, July – September, 3, 6.