

The Role of Cyberspace in Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

Interfaith dialogue in the contemporary world is one of the mostly advocated issues by moderate religious people. Ecumenical activities are being carried out worldwide either between people of the same faith; like Muslim to Muslim or Christian to Christian dialogue; or among people of different faith; like Muslim to Christian to Jewish dialogue. To achieve this goal, various mediums are being employed by different people at suitable time and place. Mediums such as conferences, workshops, debates and exchange of messages and letters are good examples employed for interfaith dialogue. Currently, the cyberspace is another medium employed and viewed by some people as the best for interfaith dialogue. The cyberspace on its own is used in different ways in this regard. It is an all-encompassing medium which can be used for conferences, workshops, debates and exchange of letters. This brief survey looks at the role of cyberspace in interfaith dialogue.

Key Words: Cyberspace, Interfaith, Dialogue

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Introduction

Cyberspace is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as the online world of computer networks and the internet. (Lemke, 1993) argues, “cyberspace is the space of interactive computational possibilities. It is one sense a network that makes all participating computers and their accessible contents (data, programs) available to the users of any participating computer, anywhere. It means that all the information on earth and every strategy for transforming information ever conceived anywhere are in principle available to every user all the time.”

Dialogue is also defined by the Macmillan English Dictionary 2006, as a process in which two or more people or group have discussions in order to solve problems; while interfaith was defined as an adjective meaning involving people of different religious faiths.

Thus, the topic under discussion can be presented as the role of the world of internet in bringing people or group of various religious faiths to discuss issues they disagree on. This article looks at this topic through the following subtopics: Islam’s perspective on dialogue, means of interfaith dialogue before the cyberspace, advantages of the cyberspace dialogue, disadvantages of the cyberspace dialogue and the impact of cyberspace in interfaith dialogue.

Islam's Perspective on Dialogue

The Qur'an categorically encourages tolerance and thus recommend engagement with people of other faith. It says:

“if any of the polytheist seeks asylum from you, grant him asylum until he hears the word of Allah. Then convey him to his place of safety. That is because they are people who do not know” (At-Taubah: 6, Ali Quli Qarai).

The Prophet himself crowned the issue of dialogue when he practically engaged the Christians of Najran during the latter parts of his mission. Those Christians visited the Prophet to inquire about his mission and to ask and argue with him about their belief.

The Prophet accommodated them and engaged them in a long discussion, until the dialogue reached the red-line of the Christians (THE TRINITY) And here Allah resolved the issue by asking the Prophet to go into “mubahala” with the Christians.

The peaceful nature of this engagement is the fact that Allah never condoned fight at the end of the this argument . Allah says in this regards:

“indeed the case of Jesus with Allah is like the case of Adam: He created him from dust then He said “BE and it was. This is the truth from your Lord, so do not be among the skeptics.

Should anyone argue with you concerning him, after the knowledge that has come to you, say:

Come! let us call our sons, and your sons, our women and your women, our souls and your souls then let us pray earnestly, and call down Allah's curses upon the liars" (Aal-Imran: 59-61).

This indicates that at the end of every dialogue, there should be peace, and judgement should be left with Allah. The Qur'an says:

"Indeed, Allah will judge between the faithful, the Jews, the Serbians, the Christians, the Magians and the polytheists on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed Allah is witness to all things" (Al Hajj: 17).

Again it says: "there is no compulsion in religion..." (Al-Baqara: 256).

Means of Interfaith Dialogue before the Cyberspace

Interfaith dialogue between or among people of the same religion or different religion existed long ago in various forms.

Humans saw the need for peaceful co-existence a vital need for the world, and thus tried in various ways to achieve that goal.

Today, the need for a more harmonious society surpasses that of yesterday. The rampant turmoil in the world is a witness to this situation.

In the previous years, various means have been employed to achieve this goal. Some have been successful while others end up leaving more rift among the people.

Mediums such as conferences, debates, symposia, workshops etcetera, are being used to bring people together to dialogue and understand themselves. In recent times, however, the cyberspace is being used as another effective tool for dialogue.

The internet which had connected the world into a global village, had made it possible to introduce another phase for bringing people together. And even though it is a very effective tool with many advantages, its disadvantages cannot be underestimated as well.

Advantages of the Cyberspace Dialogue

Unlike the other forms of face to face physical dialogue, the cyberspace saves time and energy. Conferences held on the internet are much time saving compared to other means.

Previously, people will have to travel from one place to another and spend much time to meet others for dialogue. The cyberspace on its part can bring people together with just a click on one button on the keyboard.

For example, a simple connection with a Skype brings various people from around the world to a large conference where each and everyone virtually connects and sees others. This eventually saves time and energy.

Another advantage of the cyberspace dialogue is its freedom from physical engagement. In the face to face dialogue, it is sometimes very difficult to end in a peaceful manner; hence, its less significance to the listeners.

This is because, both or all parties see each other and can easily be provoked by the presentation of others, But in the cyberspace dialogue, no matter the degree of the heat from others, there will definitely be no physical engagement. Here too there are no supporters present to cause chaos or disturb the discussants.

Again, in the cyberspace discussion, there is easy access to unforeseen information. Sometimes in a hot discussion, certain issues do pop up, which have not been planned for; and the face to face dialogue does not allow one to go back and refer.

In the cyberspace however, just one click in the search engine brings back enough information to the participant in less than a minute.

Disadvantages of the Cyberspace Dialogue

Albeit the advantages mentioned above, there are still some short comings when it comes to cyberspace dialogue. It is argued that because of easy access to information on the cyberspace, people, particularly, students, are becoming lazier day by day.

Previously, people go by themselves to the shelves and library for references and to learn by themselves; and through this, increase their scope of knowledge, and even get to know things they have not planned to learn.

Nowadays, people think there is everything on the internet; however, the problem with this habit is that it may prevent further investigation on issues, and limit research work.

Another problem with the cyberspace dialogue is the unlimited freedom it gives to all sides involved in the dialogue. This freedom may lead very descent people to be antagonistic and very aggressive in their approach. And this is because they think no one is watching over them.

Moreover the same unlimited freedom does give some people the guts to even lie about references and information, which is sometimes difficult to figure out until after the dialogue.

The Impact of Cyberspace in Interfaith Dialogue

Undoubtedly, cyberspace has played significant role in the affairs of the current world. Practical experience reveals that education in the current world without cyberspace is almost impossible.

In this regard, (Lemke, 1993) writes:

“Educational theory has resisted this shift, not surprisingly. We can claim, against traditional CAI, that human social interaction is a necessary element of education. We can claim that people interact with other people in fundamentally different ways, probably necessary for learning, from how they interact with artifacts and natural objects, including today’s computers.

But we also know that people can learn in additional ways if a base of social learning is provided: by observing, by listening, by reading, by video viewing, by manipulating objects, by experimenting, by writing, by drawing, by calculating, etc.

And in cyberspace all of these, and more, will be available. You could even create virtual classrooms in cyberspace (though hopefully only for database on the history of schooling)”

In the case of interfaith dialogue, the impact of the cyberspace cannot be overemphasized. Almost all the various forms of dialogue which are held physically, can be held on the cyberspace.

There are conferences being held on interfaith dialogue on the cyberspace; where various people are invited to take part in online discussions on issues bothering the world at large.

There are also forums held on the internet, where issues on religion are being discussed; and people share divergent views on issues. In other instances, the forums are turned to debates which help participants to see the other side of the problem. Some of these forum sites are full with beneficial resources for researchers.

In my view, the most important impact of cyberspace interfaith dialogue is that, it has taught many people tolerance.

On the cyberspace, people are unconsciously obliged to listen , read, and recognize the views of others. Even if they are being provoked, they still remain unprovoked because they can not see the people on the other side physically for them to engage in a fight. The peaceful nature of this kind of dialogue make people recognize the view of others even if they strongly disagree.

Again, the cyberspace has helped in interfaith dialogue in the sense that it allows the freedom of expression of faith without fear. While people fear to express their faith for lack of security, the cyberspace have secured them to freely express themselves.

They are not under any threat because they are engaged only virtually without physical contact. Most people feel reluctant to express their belief for fear of life and property and this happens when people engage in physical contact with people of other faiths.

The cyberspace had eased the fear of life and property, and has made it very easy for people to share their knowledge and express their feelings and faith.

Easy dissemination of information and knowledge, is another impact of the cyberspace in interfaith dialogue. The various forums sites on the internet have made easy the spread of knowledge. For every question posed by a colleague, scholars from the various schools of thought come out to express their views.

And by so doing, the information which has long been hidden become apparent. Meanwhile, learning is made easy in this process. A whole topic may be discussed in one sitting and a person will get to know knowledge that needed some years at schools to be learnt.

Conclusion

Generally, the vital role of cyberspace in the world today is inevitable. It has made great impact in all fields of learning. Religious knowledge, as well as dialogues among faiths, are not excluded from the immense contribution of the cyberspace.

In this article, it has been made clear some of the roles of cyberspace in interfaith dialogue. This has been done by looking at first of all the Islamic perspective on dialogue, then the other forms of interfaith dialogue that existed before the cyberspace.

Other issues discussed are the advantages and disadvantages of cyberspace dialogue. Here it has been revealed that, with all the great impact of the cyberspace, it still cannot go without some flaws.

Moreover, some roles of the cyberspace in interfaith dialogue have been discussed in this article. These included; the possibility of holding all types of dialogue on the cyberspace, people learning the habit of tolerating each other because they cannot see one another lest they fight, the freedom of expression of faith without fear, and the easy dissemination of knowledge, as well as easy access to information.

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