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Promoting Interreligious Understanding Through the Holy Quran

Munif Z. F. Nordin[a]*, Nor Fariza Mohd Nor[b]

ªUniversiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia
ᵇUniversiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper discusses the Qur'anic term of *Aḥsan al-Qawl* as a basic linguistic concept of language role in interreligious communication in order to identify the meanings of (inter)religious communication based on the Qur'an and to construct the appropriate model in analysing interreligious discourse. The connection of the term with language use and language practice in interreligious communication will be discussed. The findings show that the principles of interreligious communication are mostly based on the God-man relation, and also the man-man-nature relation. These relations clearly distinguish the meanings of religious communication in the Islamic perspective from the Western perspective.

Keywords: Interreligious communication; religious language; religious discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Ishii (2008) proposes the urgent task of planning and implementing interreligious communication study as a new challenging paradigm due to the critical interreligious conflicts and battles across the world. In Malaysian context, the conflicts for example, are over the use of the word 'Allah' as well as the use of the Malay Bible. These two are considered as interreligious conflicts which need to be viewed by using interreligious communication framework.

With this view in mind, therefore, this paper intends to discuss the Qur'anic term of *Aḥsan al-Qawl* as a basic linguistic concept of language role in interreligious communication in order to identify the meanings of (inter)religious communication based on the Qur'an, and to construct the appropriate model in analysing

* Corresponding author. Tel.:+6049285595; Fax: +6049285616
  E-mail address: munif@uum.edu.my

interreligious discourse.

The term *Ahsan al-Qawl* is cited from: Who is better in speech than one who calls (men) to Allah, works righteousness, and says, I am of those who bow in Islam? (*Surah Fussilat*: 41:33). The connection of the term with language use and language practice in interreligious communication will be discussed based on an Islamic philosophy of language and an Islamic philosophy of religious perspectives.

2. Language and interreligious communication

"No people or tribe is without religion, however variously it finds expression and even if it has not been specifically identified by name" (Sundermeier 1999, p. 856). This means that religious experience, belief and expression are woven into the very fabric of human nature and life. It is true that religion is found everywhere, nevertheless, it has proven impossible to formulate a definition of religion that is universally acceptable for religion is an extremely sensitive and sentimental issue. Any movement or group that masked their religious actions (whether in a positive or the opposite manner), in the name of faith and religion, apparently tend to be very influential and gain huge support from the people. In the new millennium, globalization and growth of technology have enabled people to travel and migrate without much problem. In fact, people nowadays are often said to have been extensively "globalized" by the Westcentric ideology of science and technology and lost their traditional religion-consciousness. Therefore, many countries in the world have citizens who embrace different types of religion. Religious diversity in a country, thus, should not be seen as an encumbrance, but as an asset. Such diversity calls for tolerance, which according to Wilmot (1997) is viewed as willingness and readiness to accept the differences and acknowledge rights of others to be different.

Ishii (2008) points out that interreligious conflict and interethnic conflict that have been happening at present may be attributed to the natural epitomes of such postcolonial and postmodern ideological movements. A more extensive study points to the fact that these conflicts and battles are "based on long-standing and deep-rooted religious-ethical traditions and identities" (Ishii, 2008, p. 135). Surprisingly, "today", however, Bakar (1997) asserts that "far from being buried in the dustbin of history, religion is making a comeback. Contemporary religious revival is not restricted to any one religion. It has become a universal phenomenon" (p. 3). The revival in embracing and understanding religion has seen the increase number of scholars conducting studies in intercultural communication from interreligious perspectives (e.g., Chen 2001; Chen & Starosta, 2005; Chuang, 2004; Ishii, Klopf, & Cooke, 2003). Tu (2002), who takes a stance from a nonethnocentric, interreligious, and intercivilizational point of view cautions that:

> *Unless we truly believe that we can and must learn from faiths of other peoples, "dialogue" can easily degenerate into a strategy for conversion. The plurality of faith, as a defining characteristic of spirituality in the 21st century, demands that all ethico-religious traditions enter into the dialogue among civilizations for mutual learning (p. 87).*

Acceptance of diversity and difference does not rule out the possibility of necessary interreligious and intra-religious criticism. O'Grady and Scherle (2007), rightly state that any apposite theology of religion or interreligious relations needs to include not only reflections by a religion "on the observation of other religions from the outside" but also "theological reflection" by a religion upon itself (O'Grady & Scherle, 2007, p. 8). The underlying assumption of interreligious dialogue is that despite differences and disparities between religions, there is basic human commonality which makes it possible for people to communicate with one another and to discover how we can learn to understand and embrace each other's religion. However, it is a fact that neither the challenge nor how such dialogue is to be worked out will be the same for everyone. Diversification should be matched with understanding and communication which requires pressing articulation, locally and globally.

3. The meanings of (inter)religious communication in the Qur'an

In Islam, the Qur'an is the main source of knowledge. This Holy Book covers various concept of knowledge, either generally or specifically. Behind the Qur'an, there is *hadith* which becomes the second source in Islam in