UNDERSTANDING ‘THE OTHER’:
ATTITUDES TOWARDS INTERRELIGIOUS
DIALOGUE IN TURKEY

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SUMMARY

In this study, firstly, the short history of “interreligious dialogue” in Turkey is dis-
cussed. Afterwards, different attitudes are given place to perception of that concept. The
tempt of Christian world which supports the idea of dialogue reflected lately in Turkey
because of politics and social reasons. Initially, despite some reactional attributes toward
dialogue, afterwards different approaches developed. Insufficiency of transition of dia-
logue materials into Turkish and their prejudicially evaluations have an influential func-
tion in the formation of these attitudes. In this frame, three approaches to the concept of
“interreligious dialogue” are studied. Radical one of these attitudes accepts the idea of
dialogue as a missionary method. But the other approach emphasizes on that the dia-
logue is necessary for social justice, tolerance and peace between religions in Turkey.
According to last approach, the dialogue is necessary for a dialogistic relationship be-
tween believers. For this attitude, the dialogue should be done in individual level.

Key Words: Interreligious Dialogue, Turkey, Nationalism, Peace, Culture of Living
Together, Islam and Christianity.

‘ÖTEKI’Yİ ANLAMAK:
TÜRKİYE’DE DINLERARASI DIYALOGA DÂIR TUTUMLAR

ÖZET

Bu çalışmada öncelikle “dînlerarası diyalog”un Türkiye’deki kısa tarihi ele alın-
maktadır. Daha sonra bu kavramın algılanmasına yönelik farklı tutumlara yer verilme-
tedir. Diyalog fikrini destekleyen Hristiyan dünyanın çabası, siyasi ve sosyal nedenler-
den dolayı Türkiye’de daha geç yarık buldu. İlkین diyaloga yönelik bazı tepkisel tutum-
lara karşın, sonraları farklı yaklaşımlar gelişti. Diyalog materyallerinin Türkiye’ye intika-
lindeki yetersizlik ve onlara yönelik önyargıli değerlendirmeler, bu yaklaşımların teşek-
külinde temel bir etkiye sahiptir. Bu çerçevede, “dînlerarası diyalog” kavramına yönelik
üç yaklaşım incelenmektedir. Bu yaklaşımların radikal olanı, diyalog fikrini bir misyo-
nerlik metodu olarak kabul eder. Fakat diğer diyalogun Türkiye’de dînler arasında sos-
yal adalet, hoşgörü ve barış için gerekli olduğunu vurgu yapar. Son yaklaşımı göre ise,

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I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN TURKEY

Since more than fifteen years, various attitudes towards the discourse of interreligious dialogue have been taken place in Turkey. Catholic Church especially in the second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and then Protestant Churches (World Council of Church) initiated interreligious dialogue with different purposes. Due to diverse religious traditions gradually start to live all together, The Western churches wanted Christians to adopt dialogue in their relations with non-Christians. In the many church documents, besides being of the piece of mission, dialogue is also regarded with the form of coming together with the other for common problems of human being.

Owing to undeveloped mass communication devices and especially with the effect of politic situation, this discussion has been a current issue in the beginning of 1990’s in Turkey. Since that time, with help of social and political stabilization, conferences, symposiums and other works about interreligious dialogue increasingly have continued.¹

In this frame, dialogue and dialogue activities have been dealt with different approaches. In the beginning, the discourse of interreligious dialogue has taken place with transposition of western church’s dialogue understanding and then meetings in Turkey. Beneath the supporting of some civil society organizations and institutions, there have been done symposiums in limited quantity.


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In these meetings, it has been treated to be in dialogue against the clash of civilization thesis rather than what and how of the dialogue discourse.

By 2000, different attitudes towards dialogue started to appear. Firstly, at the end of 1990’s, an approach is in favor of dialogue which sees dialogue is necessary for tolerance and world peace, further more social justice in the global world, has been developed. The matter attracts attention here is the identifying the activities of that attitude with certain religious community, F. Gulen group. Besides, this attitude which establishes “intercultural dialogue platform” on behalf of dialogue, has signed so many meetings.

Particularly after 2000’s, an opposite manner which defends in nationalist character that interreligious dialogue is only a method of mission in absolute meaning, has appeared. This attitude has a negative outlook about all activities of dialogue. In addition to these two mentioned approaches, a more academic attitude, which accepting particularly the necessity of dialogical relation between believers in different religions in Turkey, has come in to being. Briefly, these three attitudes towards interreligious dialogue will be coped with in descriptive manner here.

II. ATTITUDES TOWARDS INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN TURKEY

A. Accepting the Necessity of Dialogue for Social Justice, Tolerance and World Peace between Religions

Particularly in last decade, an attitude towards interreligious dialogue, which is in opposition to assertion that interreligious dialogue is only a missionary method and accepts the necessity of dialogue for tolerance, world peace and moreover for social justice in global world, has grown up in Turkey². One of the


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interesting cases of this attitude is the identifying dialogue labors with civil society organizations which have sympathy for M. Fethullah Gülen community.

They insist on that the conception of dialogue is not a newly-made conception. In the despite of that, dialogue is described as understanding, learning and knowing the other by means of tolerance, honesty and love without coercion. Furthermore, it’s seemed as an encounter which provides cooperation in common matters of global world for religious leaders in the name of world peace. Taking Abraham as a center name in the point of faith, they embrace that it must be spoken of similarities and common values rather than differences. Even though it is prescribed that interreligious dialogue is not an endeavor to convert the other, mission or call for Islam, it is inculcated not to be exaggerated missionary effort in the sense of religious proclamation. For example, it is emphasized that it is not to be mentioned the mission with its bad fame related with 19th century colonialism.
Dialogue sympathizers, who allege that both of Quran and Bible have been read in churches throughout Muslim-Christian dialogue, express many Christians begin to see Mohammad as prophet increasingly. Besides, it is accepted that dialogue is the most powerful alternative against the clash of civilization.6

This attitude especially declares that Abraham is the common father in Jews-Christian-Muslim dialogue and Abraham is the unifying element of bases of three monotheistic divine religions7. Alongside this helpful data of dialogue, it is asserted that dialogue is a necessity because of creation of people in different nations by Allah as mentioned in the Quran8. This manner of dialogue thinks that Quranic verses have discussed by breaking off their historical and political contexts. Therefore it considers that it is claimed that Quran is against dialogue. The attitude asserts that there are common points between Muslims and People of Book. it accepts that prophet is in dialogue with People of Book unlike his relationship with “Kafir”9. That approach, which exemplifies Quranic, prophetic-

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In the beginning, meetings related with dialogue have been carried out by different surroundings. But afterwards, these have been begun to be remembered only with activities of civil organizations which sympathize with certain circle, Gulen community.\footnote{Kurucan, \textit{Diyalogun Temelleri}, pp. 99-104, 106-111; Karaman, \textit{Dinlerarası Diyalog Nedir?}, pp. 62-63, 66-70; Aydüz, \textit{Dinler Arası Diyalog}, pp. 35.}

As a followers of this attitude, Niyazi Oktem alleges that dialogue meetings is done between equal sides and accepts Department of Religious Affairs as representative of Muslim society in Turkey. Moreover, this approach gives an example the Gulen’s meeting with Greek Patriarch, Barthalemon and Pope John Paul the second to prove Muslims don’t stand behind in interreligious dialogue activity. Even Oktem suggests establishing a dialogue secretary. Because, it is expressed that the other’s prejudices for Islam have changed slowly in conclusion of dialogue works.\footnote{Mehmet Kamış, “Medeniyetler Buluşması”, \textit{Aksiyon}, 14-20 Şubat 1998, Vol. 167, pp. 26-31; Öktem, “11 Eylül Olayı ve Dinlerarası Dıyolog”, pp. 63-64; Adamakis, “Yahudilik, Hristiyanlık ve İslam Arasında Dıyolog: Bir Ortodoks Bakış Açısı”, pp. 55-58; Aydüz, \textit{Dinler Arası Dıyolog}, pp. 182-185, 209-210; Kurucan, \textit{Diyalogun Temelleri}, p. 82.}
B. The Perception of Interreligious Dialogue only as a Missionary Method

In recent years, mainly, a party which is taking side against interreligious dialogue activities has come into being in Turkey. According to followers of this idea, dialogue and all labors about it provide contributions to church missionary activities. These nationalist sympathizers claim that works about dialogue conception and its practical experience don’t comport with Qur’an, Sunna and related tradition. Therefore, this conceptualization is called by them as a new face of missionary.¹³

They assert that interreligious dialogue is just an impossible discourse, further more there can not be a common area between religions. Because of religions have immutable principles. In this way, it is accepted that conceptions such as “Abrahamic religions”, “common ancestor Abraham” and “garden of religions” are produced in order to alienate Muslims from their religion and to negate truth discourse of Islam. That opposite group indicates that the fact lies beneath the demand of dialogue is just “Mission”, though there are common anxieties which related with violent, unjustness, poverty, etc.¹⁴

That group passionately rejects/disagrees the dialogue attitude which claims dialogue has Quranic, prophetical and historical roots. The opposites believe that the conception of People of Book is not different from “Kafir” term. They


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assert that there is no common shared characteristic/ground between Muslim and People of Book in the terms of faith, by giving examples of Quranic verses. According to this attitude which refuses the examples of dialogue, the Medina vesikası/document is manifesto, the immigration to Ethiopia is taking refuge, the letters sent to neighbor kings are call for Islam/tablig and the relationship with Jewish and Christian groups is the message for Islam. In respect of history of Islam, the opposite group also believes in that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims has no unfavorable situations. In spite of that, as a newly produced/made conception, the interreligious dialogue is just a current appearance of mission which all ways are considered permissible by Paul.

That group accepts dialogue as the most obvious reflection of anxiety of global world hegemony of Christian world. Moreover it has interrogated to be restricted the interreligious dialogue only by People of Book. This attitude claims that call for Islam and dialogue are different from each other. Also it has regarded some Quranic verses which seem to criticize People of Book. Additionally, in respect of opposite attitude, supporting the dialogue only by certain group and determining the frame of dialogue activities by Non-Muslims is conspicuous. It is mentioned that the inequality/unfairness between sides appear in the non-existence of Muslim clergy which is similar to Christians.

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16 Özşahin, Kaosun Jeopolitiği, pp. 216-217; Tekin, Diyalogcululara Kuran Dersi, pp. 19-20, 60-64, 240-245; Sezen, Diyalog İhane, pp. 61-68.


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cause of that, it is asserted that sympathizers of dialogue are being an instrument to Christian missionary.\textsuperscript{20}

Antagonists, who touch on impossibility of religious dialogue, have claimed that there are no any concrete developments in social themes\textsuperscript{21}. In addition, they dwelled on places of meetings that are made by supporting of dialogue followers in Turkey. In respect of opposite attitude, chosen the holy lands in terms of People of Book like Antioch, Edessa, Harran, Tarsus, Izmir, etc. and worn the religious dress indicate what real intention of the other is\textsuperscript{22}. Because of all these reasons, this attitude has alleged that interreligious dialogue is a new method of evangelization. Furthermore, it has accused of supporter of dialogue by giving support to global powers which destroy national and religious values and damage to national identity in Turkey\textsuperscript{23}.

C. Accepting the Necessity of Interreligious Dialogue for a Dialogical Relation between Believers in Various Religions

In recent years, in addition to the mentioned attitudes above which are concerning with the frame of dialogue in Turkey, a new mode/manner has come into being. In particular, this attitude that develops in academic circles looks like closer than others for composing a Muslim theology for religions about dialogue.


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Representatives of this manner especially scrutinize the contemporary inter-religious dialogue discourse that implies a missionary frame in Catholic and Protestant churches’ attitudes. In addition to this institutional attempt, they try to put individual dialogue endeavor on agenda unlike the approaches above. In respect of this, it is accepted that assembling believers of different religions to provide solutions to common problems is possible with the help of individual dialogue activities more than the institutional works. Because, though they highlight dialogue in the solution to common problems of humanity churches don’t be purified mission anxiety and also see the dialogue necessary for evangelization of the other. In this context, that attitude suggests to develop dialogue that is not surrounded by mission and a dialogue understanding which is the means of living all together and social peace.

According to believers of a dialogical relation, dialogue mustn’t be an attempt which regards its reality/truth as absolute/ultimate reality throughout supposing the others’ truth doctrine insufficient. Differences which make each religion distinctive themselves must be preserved. In spite of that, dialogue must

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be a purchase of opinion that information about the other is compared, exchanged and arranged with new knowledge. Moreover, this process must be valid for the other side. Therefore, it is desired that individual tries to understand the truth and religion perception of the other by taking himself for the other in dialogue process.\(^28\)

Discourse about the other’s religious understanding will get validity, throughout accepting it by the other personally. So, seeing the idea of truth and salvation as ultimate reality by believers of a religion is the indispensable distinctive component of that faith or tradition. To take this circumstance as a difference will make this dialogical relation healthier/more reliable.\(^29\)

Especially, it is defended that common ethical and practical situations must be spoken in dialogue activities. To tell the truth, getting together me and the other for solution against problems which threaten future of humanity like starvation, poverty, unemployment, ethical destruction, unbelief, health, education and law is to be counted as fundamental duty for dialogue\(^30\). It is emphasized that having been cooperated for solving such common problems more than theological themes and having been looked at contributions of religion in the frame of dialogue. However, ignoring religious matters or disregarding them


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may affect the relationship with the other in negative sense. At least, solutions offered by religions have importance in solving mentioned common themes.\textsuperscript{31}

Representatives of this attitude have thought that equality between sides of dialogue is necessary for making dialogue healthy. Further they believe that’s impossible in institutional measure. In this context, it is mentioned inequality situations in recent dialogue activities: (i) it is talked about that agenda and themes off/for dialogue are determined by Christians. (ii) It is expressed that while Christians speak on behalf of their institution, Muslims remain individual. (iii) It is stated in particular that Muslims couldn’t express them sufficiently owing to formal speech language is English.\textsuperscript{32}

This approach that is in side of individual dialogue activities, want sides to try to be in agreement as far as possible and to avoid definite decisions. Firstly, it is taken basis to discover common points after that to state different points and than to express both common and different matters. The most important pre-condition of these meetings is the entering sides into dialogue without bias.\textsuperscript{33}

Some followers of that attitude prescribe that it must be a criterion which all people accept it as common value in regarding on evaluation the matters other suggests. For instance according to Mahmut Aydın, human self-respect and humanly values occupy a place in center of this ethical criterion. Therefore, faith bases which religious traditions put forward, have acquired validity, accuracy


\textsuperscript{32} Aydın, Dinler Arası Diyalog Üzerine, p. 134; Alıcı, “Müþterek Kelimeler ve Aykiri Oluþlar”, p. 28; Alıcı, Müşliîan-Hristiyen Diyalogu, p. 23; Aydın, “Dinler Arası Diyalog Yeni Bir Misyon Yöntemi Mi?” p. 29.


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and importance in proportion to suitability to benefit of humanity and humanly values.  

CONCLUSION/EVALUATION

First approach that expresses dialogue only with mission is seemed to ignore some cases. Having been claimed that the cases which church counts as world common problems absolutely is for mission and furthermore, Christian world has no any anxiety and curiosity/concern about them, gives an attempt to comprehend intention. Whereas, dissimilar to institutional dialogue enterprise of Catholic and Protestant world. There is found individual dialogue endeavors which consist of world peace and social themes without associated with missionary.

Nationalism and national identity discourse constitute the main point of this attitude. In respect of that, globalization and West that defends it, try to change the Turkish national culture and its religious understanding throughout components that may be in contrary to national culture like interreligious dialogue. Since, the opposite attitude advocates that dialogue is a newly-made conception and West invents it. It defends that Muslim Non-Muslim relationships is so affirmative in historical context.

The approach, which defends dialogue passionately, is seemed to advocate assertions of Vatican/Church. However, the relationship between dialogue and mission has never negated in development period of Vatican dialogue understanding and moreover it has spoken that this relation is how it must be. In point of view of being comprehended of Catholic Church's dialogue understanding, it may look at the dialogue documents about expressions towards Muslims. When it is made, it could be seen that Catholic Church puts forward its standpoint throughout a Muslim description in spite of Muslims.

The discourse of common father Abraham doesn't make the distinctiveness of theological differences and the separated prophetic understandings which

34 Aydin, Dînler Arası Dîyâlûg Üzerine, pp. 137-140.

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stems from theological differences. However, the Abraham's description of Judaism, of Christianity and of Islam and conceptual frame that lay on him, is absolutely different from each other. Other than that, Islam has intended to purify the *tawhid* understanding/perceptiveness which is distorted, from untrue/superstitious matters.

Claiming that the current interreligious dialogue discourse was in Quran, in life of prophet and in the historical frame/background so many centuries ago, before Vatican expresses it, the attitude that desires dialogue has fallen into error by appropriating a newly modern conception or a pattern which is fulfilled its content by churches to Islamic history and terminology.

The assertion that sides of two edges of dialogue are equal in contemporary dialogue activities is seemed untrue. Since, that equality is come to mean to establish an Islamic institution against Vatican which is unique competent authority of Western Catholic world in religious matter and expresses the current interreligious dialogue. However, such an institution isn't in question in standpoint of Islam.

The manner which adopts the necessity of dialogical relation, unlike other attitudes, has presented a wider perspective in dealing with the frame of dialogue discourse. In this context, the attitude, which mentions individual dialogue and cares about it, is in favor of being treated ethical and social themes further than theological ones by believers. Despite of that, to be ignored the religious-theological themes damages dialogical relation. Also, the period of dialogue will not be damaged as long as the absolute truth and salvation discourse which emerge from own faiths of believers are accepted valid/meaningful in its own religious traditions.

At last analysis, beyond these three attitudes, these three cases have significant in constituting a Muslim theology for religions. (i) Firstly, a relationship, that is purposed being purified the prejudices about the other and being aimed for understanding of the other/collocutor and learning some things from him, is necessary. (ii) Secondly, in the same way, the purpose of explaining and presenting himself to the other has formed another face of this relation. (iii) Lastly,
it must be come together to resist in common problems and to find solutions for them. Existing of these three dimensions together will make dialogue activity possible.