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The Role of Saudi Universities in Promoting Dialogue among Civilizations

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to identify and recognize different roles of universities in promoting dialogue among civilizations and know the status quo of the universities in that respect. A questionnaire was developed in order to validate and decide the status quo of the different roles of universities in dialogue among civilizations. The results indicated a consensus among the Staff Members of Saudi Universities on the importance of dialogue among civilizations and highlighted the potential role that Saudi Universities can play in enhancing dialogue among civilizations.

Key words: Dialogue, response, civilizations, Saudi Universities, professors, consensus, Saudi civil society, status-quo

INTRODUCTION

Dialogue is an important aspect of human life and of social activities. It is the main gateway through which a nation can prevent conflicts on local, national and international levels. Dialogue among civilizations can reduce misunderstandings and mistrust in addition to laying the foundation for a non-violent resolution of controversies. To enter into a meaningful dialogue for better mutual understanding, each individual of a society has to exercise tolerance towards other ways of thinking, towards people who base their daily lives on values and experiences other than our own. Dialogue among civilizations is a pressing need for peaceful life, mutual respect and, for fair and equitable implementation of the international law. The dialogue among civilizations has enormous potential to solve current and future economic, social and political problems by sharing experiences and through joint implementation of remedies.

Multilateral approaches are too often replaced by unilateral solutions. The challenge is to go beyond general statements and to implement concrete action aimed at building a culture of dialogue and countering negative stereotypes. New approaches will be required for education, science, cultural diversity, the media, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly at regional and sub-regional levels (Russell and Bovermann, 2005).

Ginkel (2001) stated that world is characterized by rapid, still accelerating change. This change is the direct consequence of highly improved means of transportation, communication and information. The increase in the speed, frequency and volume of interaction, as well as the exchange of goods and ideas, has been impressive, in particular in the second half of the 20th century. The impacts are visible in all the sectors of society such as economic, social, political and cultural. These complex and profound processes together have become known as globalization.

Afrasiabi (2001) indicated that dialogue among civilizations depicts, first and foremost, a trope for cross-cultural reconciliation promoting particular values-the discovery of shared beliefs and concerns, regulation of disputes through communication and the pursuit of normative consensus on global civility especially the minority rights. It invokes a new imaginary of world community, one that is inclusive rather than exclusive, which celebrates diversity instead of succumbing to the forces of global barbarism, racism and ethnic cleansing.

May (2007) stressed that sufficient room should be allocated in education curricula to teach foreign languages, with a particular emphasis on developing communication skills. To foster the implementation of the curricula, national governments in cooperation with civil society groups should establish programmes to improve multi-cultural teaching methods through exchange of information, research and training for teachers.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) also consecrated a good part of its activities since 1998 to the problematic related to dialogue among civilizations and their repercussions on the international order. UNESCO, as expected, focused more on the cultural aspect of the dialogue. It organized a set of seminars all over the world to publicize the subject (Abdelnasser, 2006). Garay (2001) defined a civilization as a group of people which through an extended period of time have developed a common culture. Whereas civilization is what can be transmitted from one culture to another. For instance, potato farming was transmitted from Andean America to Europe and then to the rest of the world, just as the use of the plough started in one corner of the world and spread everywhere. In other words, civilization is technical and material: it is what can be passed on (Boukhari, 2004). However, Rabinow (1984) concluded that dialogue is not negotiation or polemics. In negotiation, the parties involved are concerned with the satisfaction of their personal interests. Negotiation usually ends in some form of accommodation of interests that all parties accept. In polemics, the parties are not, like in dialogue, involved in the work of reciprocal elucidation of the subject under discussion. In dialogue, on the contrary, there is a cooperative search for truth. Dialogue means shedding light into things through the spoken word (logos); bringing forth that which is hidden, namely, the ground or foundation of what is present (Giannini, 1992).

Dialogue is often distinguished from narrative. The former deals with things being solidly present and aims to complete their presence by bringing forth the archaic, i.e., the universal a-historical principles, the invisible support of their presence (Giannini, 1992). Shin (2001) stated that dialogue is an important aspect of human life and a significant category of social activities. Abstractly speaking, it is a form of interaction among social forces; a means either for communication or avoiding conflicts and moderating confrontations. Boukhari (2004) asserted that the conditions for dialogue among civilizations are as follows: First of all, recognition of the other as an interlocutor having rights equal to one's own. Real dialogue is when you recognize the same dignity in the other.

Dialogue among civilizations is a process between and within civilizations, founded on inclusion and a collective desire to learn, uncover and examine assumptions, unfold shared meaning and core values and integrate multiple perspectives through dialogue (UN General Assembly Res. 56/6 Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations in 2001) (Wikipedia, 2007).

No civilization by itself can claim to represent all humanity and to assume full responsibility for it. Neither can one single civilization claim exclusive rights to provide a universally valid vision of how to be a good human being and how to live wisely in today's world (Valdas, President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003). Dialogue among Civilizations is a theory in international relations.

The theory in its current form was first introduced by Khatami (1998), former President of Iran. He originally introduced the idea of Dialogue among Civilizations as a response to Samuel P. Huntington's theory of Clash of Civilizations.

Chomsky (2000) argued that the end of university is near. According to his views, conventional universities have already lost much of their functions of knowledge production, knowledge distribution and knowledge storage. In another study, Cornett *et al.* (1996) explained that Universities are not however knowledge factories. They are vital and interactive social institutions. Along with other cultural and scientific institutions (religious, artistic, literary and scientific establishments), they act as the moral and intellectual custodians of their societies. They are important conduits for socialization, recruitment, innovation, reflection, service and empowerment. Kohn (2002) stated that Modern universities imposed a different set of boundaries on knowledge closely tied to the new positivism and empiricism of modern science. The parameters of knowledge have expanded with paradigm shifts from Newtonian to Darwinian and Einsteinian worldviews.

Two prominent theologians, one Jewish and another Muslim, have called for tolerance, May celebration and patch up of differences (Sacks, 2005; Soroush, 2007). That means dialogue with other peoples, cultures and civilizations. In this fashion, the concept of civilization itself has to undergo a profound transformation. Tonybee (1948) had aptly put it, Civilization, as we know it, is a movement and not a condition, a voyage and not a harbor. Garay (2001) ensured that universities become living models to society as a whole of communities where the unity of life is collectively pursued through the development and maintenance of traditions of moral inquiry. Spinosa *et al.* (1995) tried to extend similar ideas to other Western institutions like the justice system, where one can often find various legal traditions at play. They also focused their attention on the redesign of educational systems, which has its main goal of teaching students to become articulators of their national cultural values.

A comprehensive review of literature on the role of Saudi universities in promoting dialogue among civilizations shows that a very little information is available on this aspect. Therefore, it was imperative to study the role of local universities in promoting dialogue among civilizations for the benefit of local community to solve their social issues.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Selection of study sample: The study sample was selected from three Saudi Universities namely Taif University, King Saud University and King Faisal University. A total of 90 Professors were selected from three universities with each representing 30 professors. Each professor was given a questionnaire for his opinion on this issue and to suggest more roles to be added about the roles of universities in enhancing dialogues among civilizations.

Preparation of questionnaire: A questionnaire was prepared for this study to determine the roles of universities in dialogue among civilizations. There were a total of 30 questions for response to measure their opinions about the importance of dialogue among civilizations and the importance of universities in promoting the dialogue (Appendix). The questionnaire includes three responses namely Yes, To Some Extent and No). The responses were represented in marks; (Yes = 3 marks, To Some Extent = 2 marks and No = 1 mark). The questionnaire was of an open-ended type so a space was given at the end of the questionnaire to give their opinions about the roles of universities in the dialogue among civilizations.

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The Saudi Universities	The scores of the staff of Saudi Universities on the questionnaire																															
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	Mean	SD
King Saud University	85	90	95	98	80	102	97	98	89	102	84	91	96	98	99	101	89	88	90	97	99	101	100	85	89	90	93	95	94	99	93.8	5.97
Taif University	95	89	99	103	96	94	100	81	93	87	88	89	99	98	97	96	95	101	102	100	97	93	90	98	88	89	99	92	93	99	94.67	5.25
King Faisal University	103	98	99	96	89	98	96	91	103	101	100	99	94	98	99	92	97	99	98	97	102	101	100	101	101	100	95	93	94	89	97.43	3.86

Procedure of study: The study was carried by adopting descriptive method. The study duration was 10-weeks to respond and was carried during 2009-2010 session. The questionnaire was given to the selected sample members (90 professors) for their opinions. After completion, the results were collected and analyzed.

Data analysis: The results of the study were analyzed by using the standard statistical mean (SAS, 1984).The mean scores of the professors' responses on the questionnaire are shown in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data in Table 1 show the rise of the scores of staff of King Saud University on the questionnaire with a mean value of 93.8 marks with a standard deviation of 5.97 marks. This showed a remarkable increase over the minimum response to the questionnaire which represents 36 marks. This indicates a consensus of King Saud University Staff of the importance of the dialogue among civilizations and that Saudi Universities play an important role in enhancing dialogue among civilizations.

The data also shows the rise of the scores of staff of Taif University on the questionnaire with a mean (94.67 marks) and standard deviation (5.25 marks) as shown in Table 1. The mean value of 36 marks shows a remarkable increase over the minimum response to the questionnaire. That indicates a consensus of the Taif University Staff of the importance of the dialogue among civilizations and that Saudi Universities play an important role in enhancing dialogue among civilizations.

Table 1 shows the rise of the scores of staff of King Faisal University on the questionnaire with a mean value of 97.43 marks with a standard deviation of 3.86 marks. The mean value shows a remarkable increase over the minimum response to the questionnaire. The results indicate a consensus of King Faisal University Staff of the importance of the dialogue among civilizations and that Saudi Universities play an important role in enhancing dialogue among civilizations.

The results of the study are supported by the results of the studies of Afrasiabi (2001) and Ginkel (2001) who stated that world is characterized by rapid, still accelerating change. This change is the direct consequence of highly improved means of transportation, communication and information. They also stated that the impacts are visible in all the sectors of society such as economic, social, political and cultural. These complex and profound processes together have become known as globalization. Similar views were also advocated by Russell and Bovermann (2005) who highlighted that new approaches will be required for education, science, cultural diversity, the media, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly at regional and sub-regional levels.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The scope and potential of dialogue among cultures and civilizations is achieving unprecedented significance. The educational institutions can provide useful advice to national bodies in the development of school and university curricula and textbooks that emphasize inter-civilizational dialogue. Inter-regional exchange of information and successful methodologies need adoption. International and regional organizations should be called upon to help develop programs to support national efforts for better education necessary for a dialogue of civilizations. Opportunities offered by new information and communication technologies should be fully exploited for the general public focused on Knowledge about others. New distance learning technologies and concepts should be meaningfully employed to enhance the outreach of such programs and to complement exchange programs for teachers, students and education policy makers. The dialogue should begin at home, underpinning national unity and the political, economic, social and cultural integration of the region; justice and accountability as the basis for the rule of law in democratic societies. Introduction of different measures of quality education by governments in the region and, in particular, a continuation of efforts to reform curricula and textbooks. A collaborative programme by UNESCO, ALECSO and ISESCO should be initiated for promoting dialogue through education, the sciences, culture and communication.

- University's members should take more interest in strategic planning to define efficient means to promote dialogue among civilizations
- Each University should ensure that the dialogue is balanced, based on equality and common will and should be conducted on an equal footing with the interlocutor. It should also be comprehensive and involves people from all walks of life
- Universities should ensure that the dialogue is beneficial to both parties and secure their respective interests relevant to cultural, scientific, economic and social life
- Provide training to youth and young people in order to develop effective media relations and to promote their agenda to media actors on all levels
- Introduce changes to the educational system adopting non-formal education methodology within the framework of fostering multicultural interaction and tolerance, providing opportunities for the involvement of students, parents, NGOs and policy-makers
- Development of methodology to disseminate inter-Civilisations dialogue among the present generations by integrating the subject of dialogue among civilizations into educational curricula
- Processes of democratisation and non-discrimination including the upholding of individual rights should be encouraged
- A mechanism should be developed for interaction and dialogue to close the gap between incumbent leaders and civil society especially the young generation

APPENDIX

Questionnaire:

Dear Professor,

This questionnaire is developed as a part of a study titled The Role of Saudi Universities in Promoting Dialogue among Civilizations. It is an open-ended one. You may add any thing that can be helpful to the subject of the study.

Read the following statements and respond by putting a tick (☐) under yes, to some extent or no

Items	Yes	To some extent	No
1. Dialogue among civilization is very important			
2. Dialogue among civilization has a political effect			
3. Dialogue among civilization has an economical effect			
4. Dialogue among civilizations has a religious impact			
5. The problem of clash of civilizations can be solved through dialogue			
6. Dialogue among civilization has solved the problem of terrorism			
7. The event of 11th September 2001 is one of the causes of dialogue among civilizations			
8. Multiplicity of religious and moral conceptions is the main reason of clash of civilizations			
9. The main objective of dialogue among civilizations is to help man become grounded again			
10. Dialogues should be balanced, based on equality and common will			
11. Dialogues among civilizations should be civilized			
12. Dialogues should be conducted among mutually exclusive, parallel lines and according to preset programme			
13. Cross-cultural education is the ideal impetus for creating a generation that promotes peace, international cooperation and respect for all nations			
14. Each youth has an important role in initializing and shaping global interaction			
15. Internet and technology as catalysts for enhancing dialogue			
16. Today, the dialogue among cultures and civilizations is no longer a mere catchword with which everybody agrees and sympathizes			
17. Dialogue represents a new paradigm of security, especially in a globalizing world with its manifold new challenges to individuals, communities and countries			
18. A commitment to dialogue among civilizations is also a commitment against terrorism			
19. Dialogue among civilizations is a pressing need for life in peace and mutual respect and for fair and equitable implementation of the international law			
20. Dialogue among civilizations affirms the right to difference and to the respect of human rights as guaranteed by the international conventions and rules			
21. Promoting dialogue among civilizations is a universally- shared responsibility			
22. It is imperative to build dialogue among civilizations and cultures on the basis of mutual respect amongst all heirs of these cultures and civilizations			
23. Dialogue is an inevitable necessity, indeed a human duty and a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence			
24. The dialogue among civilizations will help avoid misunderstandings and distrust among different groups of people			

25. Media have contributed to a better understanding among various cultures			
26. Dialogue as a chance for people of different cultures and traditions to get to know each other better, whether they live on opposite sides of the world or on the same street			
27. Globalization and the emergence of new challenges and threats to humankind have made the need for dialogue among peoples more important than ever			
28. Universities are the most dangerous institutions in the world			
29. Universities are ancient institutions whose roots were invariably religious			
30. Islam has an important stake in indulging in a sincere dialogue with the West			

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