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I'tibariat: A New Possible Theoretical Basis for Interreligious Dialogue

I'tibariat: Nova možna teoretična osnova za medreligijski dialog

Abstract: *The so-called »theory of I'tibariat«, as formulated by Muhammad Hussein Tabataba'i, is unprecedented in the philosophical and theological tradition of Islamic thinking. »I'tibariat«, i.e. »conventions«, are related to what has been necessitated and conventioned by people. I'tibariat can differ among different groups of people and usually vary from one culture to another, but at the same time, they have some main common aspects. Allamah asserts that many cultural and religious conceptions have their roots in I'tibariat. He explains how these conventions are being made by people in order to fulfil their spiritual and material necessities. This justifies how cultural and religious categories and concepts are different cross-culturally and inter-religiously. The analysis of religious language as a product of imaginative power of human intellect can testify that religious diversity is a function of the circumstances of people's lives. With this explanation, interreligious dialogue can be attained first and foremost on the presumption that mutual understanding is possible through the language which is principally I'tibari.*

Key words: *Allamah Tabataba'i, I'tibariat, interreligious dialogue*

Povzetek: T. i. teorija I'tibariat, ki jo je zasnoval Muhammad Hussein Tabataba'I, v filozofski in teološki tradiciji islamskega mišljenja nima predhodnika. »I'tibariat«, tj. »konvencije«, je povezan s tem, kar ljudje potrebujejo in o čemer so se dogovorili. »I'tibariat« se lahko med različnimi skupinami ljudi razlikuje in se običajno od kulture do kulture razlikuje, hkrati pa ima nekatere skupne vidike. Allamah trdi, da ima več kulturnih in religioznih konceptov svoje korenine v »I'tibariat«. Razloži, kako ljudje ustvarijo konvencije, da zadostijo svojim duhovnim in materialnim potrebam. To pojasni, zakaj so kulturne in religiozne kategorije ter koncepti med kulturami in religijami različni. Analiza religioznega jezika kot produkta imaginativne moči človeškega intelekta lahko pokaže, da je religiozna raznolikost funkcija življenjskih okoliščin ljudi. S to razlago se lahko medreligijski dialog najprej in predvsem doseže s predpostavko, da je vzajemno razumevanje mogoče skozi jezik, ki je prvenstveno I'tibariat.

Ključne besede: Allamah Tabataba'i, I'tibariat, medreligijski dialog

Introduction

Grand Ayatollah Allamah Sayyed Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (1903–1981), who is commonly known as Allamah Tabataba'i (shortly Allamah), was one of the most prominent thinkers of contemporary Islamic philosophy and Shia Twelver Islam. It is noteworthy that for a number of years, Allamah Tabataba'i had been participating in a series of discussions with Henry Corbin, a French thinker, in which comparative studies were applied specially on gnostic and mystical teachings of some major religions.[1]

Allamah is commonly known for his book *Tafsir al-Mizan*, a twenty-volume work of Quranic interpretation, which is an interpretation (Tafsir) of Quran with Quran and on which he had worked for about two decades, from 1954 to 1972 (Algar 2006).

Allamah has written several works on variety of subjects, including the major and famous works on philosophy, theology, mysticism, and interpretation. The main focus of this article is on the works in which the idea of I'tibariat is proposed and developed.

1 I'tibar: Definition and Types

Let's start with Allamah's important statements dealing with the definition and the territory of the notion of I'tibar. Based on his account, I'tibar is ascribing or giving (I'ta) that what is principally imagined (Hadd) and acknowledged (Hokm) of something to another thing that lacks that (Al-Tabataba'i 1428, 346–347). When one, for example, says that »Watson is lion« he is ascribing to Watson that what belongs to the real lion. This kind of ascription is similar to what we may commonly know of metaphor in literary texts; however, it should be noted that Allamah's understanding of I'tibari has basically nothing to do with linguistic metaphorical representation. Later on, it will be clarified how we can regard I'tibar as a convention which basically occurs unintentionally. Being originally unintentional,

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1   For some of their main discussions, see Dialogues with Professor Corbin, 1387 (A.H. Solar; Persian: Majmoeh Mozakerat ba professor Hanri Kurban), prepared by Sayyed Hadi Khosroshahi. Qom: Entesharat Daftear Tabliqat Eslami Hoze Elmiye Qom.

I'tibar is a natural activity which is performed in order to guarantee our survival.

Allamah states that I'tibariat are either pre-societal or post-societal (Tabataba'i 1364 A.H. /Solar/, 197). Pre-societal I'tibariat are the conventions that can be made on a personal level, quite independently of the man's social life. For instance, we necessarily conceive that our knowledge of things is in accordance with, or let's say corresponds to, the concrete and objective world; we just naturally take for granted a necessity for this correspondence (in Persian: Asl-e Motabeat-e Elm or Hojjiate Elm va Qaṭ'); however, in fact we cannot, by ourselves, prove that the objects we perceive are exactly the same as what exist in external world. For another example, take the necessity which is precondition of performing any action which is regarded by Allamah as another kind of I'tibar. To elucidate this kind of I'tibar in a more familiar way, one can notice in an introspective way that one cannot perform any action unless one, after all, chooses to decisively perform it; this final decision contains in itself the necessity of performing the action. (197–198) According to this analysis, the I'tibar of necessity is a convention which is primarily being made by our own nature in order to secure our survival. When we are starved and inclined to eat the most desirable edibles, then decide to eat and finally start eating, this »realised« decision is, in final analysis, raised according to an I'tibar which is made in order to fulfil one of our primary needs (Al-Tabataba'i 1428 A.H. /Lunar/, 347). More precisely, we, let's say, take the causal necessity between food and the fulfilment of a primary need and apply it to the relationship between eating foodstuff and relieving hunger (Talebzadeh 1389).

For Allamah, there is another kind of I'tibar which is dependent on our condition as living beings within society. Post-societal I'tibariat are the conventions that need to be made in order to establish our social life; for example, I'tibar of property, well known in the current capitalist world. According to Allamah, a phenomenon known as Language is I'tibari. (Tabataba'i 1364 A.H. /Solar/, 220; Al-Tabataba'i 1428 A.H. /Lunar/, 348–349) Later on, it will be explained how Allamah base the very existence of language on a particular type of I'tibar.

Moreover, Allamah introduces another criterion according to which I'tibar is divided into two different kinds of convention: »it is either shared, fixed

and unchanging such as the I'tibar that our knowledge is in accordance with concrete and objective world, or personal and changing like I'tibar of personal beauties or/and uglinesses« (Al-Tabataba'i 1428 A.H. /Lunar/, 350; Tabataba'i 1364, 210).

2 Conventionality of Language

We can draw a sketch of interreligious dialogue in accordance with the function of I'tibar in religious language, as established in Allamah Tabataba'i's theory of I'tibariat.

As humans, just on the threshold of becoming social beings, we primarily need to realize how to convey our intentions to the others by trying to contact them in any possible communication manner. If the purpose of our nature is to bring us to our desired perfection which is not fulfilled without socializing – because individuals help each other to realize their potentialities – there should exist some ways to communicate with others. (Al-Tabataba'i 1428, 356–357)

The notion of I'tibar or convention has been employed by Tabataba'i for explaining the relationship between meaning(s) and word(s) in language. As mentioned earlier, I'tibar is defined by Allamah as ascribing that what principally belongs to one thing to another thing. Technically speaking, it is ascribing or giving that what is principally imagined and acknowledged of one thing to another thing that lacks it. (346–347)

The language (Kalam) is conventional representation of what we have inside ourselves (in Arabic: Ma fi al-Zamir, i.e. mental meanings) by words. Words represent mental meanings in the same manner as mental meanings represent external objects. (Al-Tabataba'i 1395 A.H. /Lunar/, 307–308)

Allamah states that the fixed relationship between a word and a meaning is based on I'tibar (Al-Tabataba'i 1361 A.H. /Solar/, 16). He asserts that through I'tibar, a word becomes a meaning. Thus, this becoming (called 'Waz'a' by Allamah) is I'tibari or conventional (30). That is to say, a word, after being used for a while, moves us directly to the intended meaning

in a way that we usually do not realize we are hearing or reading words; we just grasp meanings.

3 Communicative Initiatives

Allamah suggests that if we contemplate on what people call 'society', we understand that the existence of the society is a function of what God has created in human nature which is to comprehend that we, as indigent human beings with a variety of imperfections, necessities and needs, would not be able to fulfill all our needs without help from other people. This is why we began, for the first time, to communicate with our fellowmen. (Al-Tabataba'i 1393 A.H. /Lunar/, 337)

First social communicative activities of human beings can be seen in their primary sensory interaction, as infants, with their mothers. Tabataba'i states that perceptual concepts are the easiest ones to be conveyed to the others as the examples of these concepts can be referred to by our senses; sound plays an intermediary role to refer to them. (Al-Tabataba'i, 1361 A.H. /Solar/, 17). When babies are hungry they start crying; when they are distressed they make different kinds of sounds to let their mothers know what they are in need of. (Tabataba'i 1364 A.H. /Solar/, 223, 224).

Repetition of application of sounds as substitutes of words paves the ground for mutual understanding in which individuals can directly understand and reach the meanings by hearing the words, even without giving attention to the words themselves, which is some sort of association of ideas. In this stage, a word and its meaning become identical by I'tibar. (Tabataba'i 1364 A.H. /Solar/, 223)

Allamah alleges that at this stage where sounds play an important role in communication of parties,[2] not only meanings, but also feelings like love, compassion, enmity etc. are usually expressed through sounds or sometimes body gestures.

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2   Including animals and humans: »using sounds and voices for conveying intended meanings is not restricted to humans but is also a communicative way of animals, especially birds« (Tabataba'i 1364 A.H. /Solar/, 223).

Representation of non-perceptual concepts is not totally irrelevant to the existence of perceptual ones. Some primary non-perceptual concepts and words are made by referring to their corresponding objective matters. For instance, the names of some animals would be coined by an analogy to their sounds. (Al-Tabataba'i, 1361 A.H. /Solar/, 18)

One of the consequences of Allamah's above-mentioned explanations is the belief that words are being conventioned for bearing meanings. Being conventioned means being employed cognitively – but not necessarily on purpose. According to this approach, the language is I'tibari (or conventional) and its cognitive conventional process is prior to its linguistic manifestation.

4 Religious Language and I'tibar

Tabataba'i affirms that the language of religion, especially the language that has been used in the sacred books, functions exactly the same as the language we, as humans, are equipped with, which is the language of I'tibar. In other words, the language used by religions for disclosing religious truths and teaching them to the believers is the same language as the one that is basically used by humans for conveying meanings to other people. In religious language, meanings/messages are to be conveyed to their audience by making an expansion and elaboration in ordinary linguistic meanings. (Al-Tabataba'i 1393 A.H. /Lunar/, 16–17)

Allamah believes that the religious language (called Kalam Allah in Islam) is not different, in its grammar and vocabulary, from our natural language. The major difference comes from the contents of meanings and concepts which are intended to be conveyed with this common and typical (religious) language. (78–79)

As pointed out, in the process of establishment of our natural language, words are conventioned for meanings. Here, meanings are either sensory meanings and perceptual concepts or non-sensory meanings, which are simultaneously relevant to the former by nature. In religious language, typical words and sentences are conventioned for religious, or let's say, spiritual meanings. (17)

This implies that the language of religion contains verbal expressions of a familiar language, because they need to be used by everybody, and all people, depending on their own capacities and capabilities, must benefit from them. People start with transparent layers (in Arabic: Zahir) of religious language and, if they are perseverant, gradually understand deeper meanings and principles (in Arabic: Osul) of its words and expressions. (Tabataba'i 1388 A.H. /Solar/, 74–75)

Allamah's repeated emphasis on the fact that the language of religion is the simplest form of language being used by all people, and the fact that natural language works according to conventions both clearly suggest that religious language is conventional. »Everything that has been taught and explained by religion, including the knowledge of preborn life of human beings and of their life after death, was done so through the language of I'tibar.« (Tabataba'i 1360, 6) Allamah substanciated his statement by saying that, since humans' situation before and after this temporal world is a personal situation (which even lacks an environment that is prerequisite of any interaction), rather than a social one, I'tibar has no place for men under those circumstances. Therefore, if the language of religion describes the mentioned situations and discloses some knowledge and truth about them for us as living creatures of this temporal and non-personal world, so to speak, it is inevitable that this language be I'tibari (6).

In the language of religions, perceptual meanings are employed as allegories which can help people think over and then understand transcendental (hidden) meanings (Tabataba'i, 1388, 49–50). That is to say, in the language of religion, religious meanings are understood through sensory concepts. (Al-Tabataba'i 1393 A.H. /Lunar/, 62) Allamah's explanation implies that if we are going to understand the truths and intended meanings of religious teachings, we have to begin with interpretation of the language of I'tibar which is ubiquitous in the language of religion. Through interpretation we can find our way to the real meanings of words.

5 Religions and Dialogue

From the above, it follows that understanding of the language of different religious traditions and intended meanings of their linguistic expressions

is possible, since based on Allamah's explanation, religions use the same language, i.e. ordinary natural language which has the same function and structure across religions. It is a shared, common and natural language that can be understood by all people. It is not a heavenly language with quite different basics and structures; otherwise, religion would not be a guidance for all people, especially for the perplexed. This is not to say, however, that all religions teach the same doctrines and meanings, but that learning different languages and dialects, in spite of the difference between vocabularies and grammars, is enough to learn the language of religions and paves the way for at least a basic knowledge of intended meanings behind words and expressions.

6 Mutual Understanding

Now, building upon the relation between language and I'tibar, the conceptual sketch of an interreligious dialogue would be given based on Allamah Tabataba'i's thought. As it was shown, I'tibar is a human product and it is the basis of our natural language. Religious language does not originally differ from the phenomenon that is commonly referred to as »language«. Consequently, it is quite possible for one and all to listen to the voices of religions through linguistic understanding. For this purpose, counterparts who are going to be engaged in interreligious dialogue, first, need to try to understand the meanings of the linguistic expressions of their own religion in a better and clearer way. For a deep understanding, they may need to employ hermeneutical insights and interpretational ways to discover which meanings are hidden behind and enclosed to the words. It is always possible that in case of more abstract notions, the real meaning resists to be disclosed. In such situation, it is wise to get assistance from the less complicated parts of religious context in order to interpret more abstract and complicated words, expressions and sentences. This is a method that Allamah Tabataba'i has applied to the interpretation of Quran, the holy book of Muslims (1393 A.H. /Lunar/). The same process can be applied on other religions. That is to say, we should have at least a basic knowledge of the language of other religion, its plain and idiomatic connotations, its technical and context-dependent meanings.

Interpretation or so-called hermeneutics can have a significant place in interreligious dialogue. According to Tracy (2010), hermeneutics can specify the definition of dialogue, its territory, its limitations and its influences to »new non-dialogical ways of thinking« and thereby specify interreligious dialogue.

This procedure can be used to understand what other religions say. Needless to say, the first and the most important element in any interreligious dialogue is achieving a mutual understanding. If we accept that all humans are essentially and basically identical, and realize that the foundations of our languages are fundamentally the same, and finally accept that this common language is ubiquitous and prevalent in religions, then we can accept a theoretical basis for interreligious dialogue.

David Tracy (1990) suggests that engaging in a serious interreligious dialogue shows us that our thoughts about other religions are not totally accurate (27). I understand from Tracy's statement that interreligious dialogue provides us with a more accurate mutual understanding.

According to Shafiq and Abu-Nimer (2011), the goal of dialogue »is not to eliminate differences of opinion and conviction, but to gain an understanding and acceptance of those differences« (1). From this emphasis, again, it becomes clear that the most important thing in any dialogue is mutual understanding. With a double emphasis: »Dialogue is not about seeking to defeat or silence others, but about learning, understanding, and increasing one's knowledge of them.« (1)

Conclusion

A simple contemplation on the meaning of the word »dialogue« and the related discussions have so far strongly suggested that a prerequisite of any interreligious dialogue is mutual understanding of each other's similarities and differences. For this reason, the role of religious language has been emphasized in this paper.

Humans' lives, their social and interactional behaviours, as well as their conventional perceptions are naturally interpenetrated, so to speak.

As stated by Allamah, language, culture and even religion are not separated from and uninfluenced by our society. We understand each other in a conventional way, because our language is I'tibari, i.e. conventional. On the one hand, conventions, at least some of them, in one culture and its religion might be considered different from the other culture, because each of them has different needs and I'tibariat. On the other hand, since we are all human beings, the main patterns of our primary needs are fundamentally the same. In a nutshell, it is reasonable to say that religious believers have some linguistic basic I'tibariat in common which makes interreligious dialogue conceivable.

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3　In the List of references, I prefer to mention the author's names and publication's date of any referred resource according to what has been written on the related resources. For instance, in one reference 'Al-Tabataba'I' can be seen as author's surname and in some others just »Tabataba'I« is mentioned. Accordingly, Muslim dates sometimes have the suffix A.H. (After Hijra) which is either Solar or Lunar; for example, the current date is 1398 A.H. (Solar) which is 1441 A.H. (Lunar); this may justify the application of three different calendar systems here.