

Dialogue and Conflict Resolution in Islam

By

Dr. Umar Muhammad Labdo
Department of Islamic Studies,
Kaduna State University,
Kaduna.

Being a paper presented at a two-day National Conference on Human Rights in Islam jointly organized by the Religious and Cultural Attaché Office, Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Abuja and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria from 31st July to 1st August, 2010.

Dialogue and Conflict Resolution in Islam

Umar Muhammad Labdo

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Introduction

Humanity has come a long way. Huge strides in various fields have been taken. Unthought-of frontiers have been opened. Fantastic discoveries in the fields of science, technology, information and communication have been recorded and significant progress in these and other fields made. Today, we are living in a global village.

One important progress made is in the sphere of international relations. After centuries of bloody wars and conflicts, today at the threshold of the 21st century, humanity is searching for new ways of resolving conflict between its various components. In this search, men are turning to universal traditions for inspiration. One of these traditions, which have a lot to offer in this respect, is Islam. And this paper is a modest attempt to explore what this complete way of life, which not unjustifiably, has the greatest claim to peace, has to offer.

Islam offers dialogue as the just and sure way of resolving conflicts. To begin with, Islam is a faith of dialogue and its Holy Scripture, the Noble Quran, is also a book of dialogue. A cursory look through the pages of the Book, reveals the highest form of objective, constructive and beautiful dialogue between all manner of people and at all levels of human relationship.

There are examples of dialogue between Allah Himself and His creatures (angels, prophets, pious men and women etc); between prophets and their people (believers and non-believers alike); between upright men and women who

struggle in the cause of truth and justice and their people who strive in falsehood and transgression, and so on. We even find in the Noble Qur'an lengthy dialogue between Allah, the Exalted and Satan, the accursed. Below are a few examples for verification.

In *Surah Al-Baqarah*, we find the following dialogue between Allah (SWT) and the Angels:

And (remember) when your Lord said to the Angels: "Verily I am going to place (mankind) generations after generations on earth". They said: "Will you place therein those who will make mischief therein and shed blood while we glorify you with praises and thanks and sanctify you?" He said: "I know that which you do not know". (2:30-31).

In *Surah Hud*, we read the following dialogue between Prophet Noah and the leaders of his people who opposed his mission:

And indeed we sent Noah to his people (and he said): "I have come to you as a plain warner. That you worship none but Allah, surely, I fear for you the torment of a painful Day." The Chiefs of the disbelievers among his people said: "We see you but a man like ourselves, nor do we see that any follow you but the meanest among us and they (too) followed you without thinking. And we do not see in you any merit above us, infact we think you are a liar."

He said, "O my people! Tell me if I have a clear proof from my Lord, and a mercy (Prophethood) has come to me from Him, but that (mercy) has been obscured from your sight, shall we compel you to accept it when you have a strong hatred for it." (12:25-28).

In the same *Surah*, there is further dialogue between no less than five other prophets and their people, including Hud, Salih, Lut and Shu'aib (12:50-60; 61-69; 77-83; and 84-95).

In an extreme instance, we find dialogue between Allah (SWT) and the lowest of his creatures, Satan! When Satan disobeyed his Lord's command to prostrate to Adam, the following dialogue ensued:

(Allah) said: "What prevented you that you did not prostrate when I commanded you?" (Satan) answered: "I am better than him; you created me from fire, and him you created from clay."(7:12)

The foregoing is but a minimal example of the lively and constructive dialogue presented by the Qur'an to its readers so that they may learn the culture of listening to the other view.

Ethics of Dialogue

Islam accords dialogue - any type of dialogue – a high position of respect. First of all, it considers the principal tool of dialogue – the word – as very important and worthy of attention. This is clear from the following parable in which a good word is portrayed as a fruit-bearing tree.

See you not how Allah sets forth a parable? A goodly word as a goodly tree, whose roots are firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the sky. Giving its fruits at all times by the leave of its Lord and Allah sets forth parables for mankind in order that they may remember. And the parable of an evil word is that of an evil tree uprooted from the surface of the earth having no stability (14:24-26).

Indeed, in Islamic symbolism, the religion itself, is portrayed as a word, so also are the Qur'an, Allah's commandment and His inspiration to his prophets.

And (He) made the word of those who disbelieved the lowermost, while it was the word of Allah that became uppermost, and Allah is All-mighty, All-wise (9:40).

Islam has laid down guidelines for dialogue, especially between people of different faiths and culture. It insists that all talks aimed at convincing the other must have the best of intentions and be conducted in a good manner. In calling people to the faith, Islam directs:

Invite (mankind) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching and argue with them in a way that is better. (16:125)

Concerning Christians and Jews in particular, the Qur'an instructs:

And argue not with the people of the scriptures (Jews and Christians) unless it be in (a way) that is better (i.e., with good words and in a good manner). (29:46)

Islam also emphasises on the points of agreement between diverse cultures and beliefs as a way of ensuring compromise and reconciliation. Consider how the Qur'an puts this idea so beautifully:

Say (O Muslims): "We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and to al-Asbat (i.e., the 12 sons of Jacob) and that which has been given to Moses, Jesus and that which has been given to prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between

any of them, and to him we have submitted.”
(2:136).

And more emphatically:

And say: “I believe in whatsoever Allah has sent of the book (i.e., all scriptures) and I am commanded to do justice among you, Allah is our Lord and your Lord. For us our deeds and for you your deeds. There is no dispute between us and you. Allah will assemble us (all) and to him is the final return.”
(42:15)

This calm, fair and unbiased argument is designed to create an atmosphere of ease and trust as a prelude to convincing the other party and securing agreement on just and equitable terms.

Justice is another indispensable element in any successful dialogue. Therefore, Islam urges its followers to be just and fair to all, irrespective of whether they are friends or foes. Justice is a value to be sought for its own sake, and it must be applied and seen to be applied, in every given situation especially when it involves people of different faiths, culture or nationality. Allah, the most high, says:

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah even though it is against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor.(4:135)

In another verse, He says:

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah and be just witnesses and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just, that is nearer to piety (5:8).

Objectivity in argument has the positive effect of calming nerves and creating a relaxed atmosphere conducive for level-headed discussion. Its principal ingredients include humility, steadfastness and a readiness to give a fair deal and accept the truth from whatever source. Equally important, opposing parties must negotiate from a position of equality; not in a master-servant situation. Islam is vehemently opposed to cultural imperialism and forceful assimilation of people, a situation that leads to European type of “final solution” or to America’s “You are either with us or against us.” The object of Islamic dialogue is not to dictate terms or impose views, but to achieve understanding and reach compromise and reconciliation. Human beings will continue to differ and to hold diverse opinions, and to force men to tow a single line is but sheer arrogance. Allah says:

And if your Lord has so willed, He could surely have made mankind into one nation, but they will not cease to disagree, except him on whom your Lord has bestowed His mercy. (11:118-119).

Levels of Dialogue

Islam has instituted dialogue at all levels of human relationship. The purpose is to give everyone concerned a right to have a say in the issue at hand and for all to benefit from the wisdom, foresight and experiences of the parties involved. This will ensure peace and stability and provide the people with a sense of worth and belonging.

At the intra-family level, where the man is supposed to be the leader, Islam has made consultation the norm for running of affairs of the family. Even on trivial issues such as weaning a baby, it insists that it should be based on consultation and mutual consent. In *Surah al-Baqara*, Allah says:

If they both (husband and wife) decide on weaning by mutual consent and after due consultation, there is no sin on them. (2:233)

Similarly, Islam recommends consultation as the way of solving inter-family disputes. A rift within a family can affect other families, as it is likely to draw the respective families of husband and the wife into the disagreement. In this situation, Islam recommends:

If you fear a breach between them twain (the man and his wife) appoint (two) arbitrators, one from his family and the other from hers, if they both wish for peace, Allah will cause their reconciliation (4:35).

At community and national levels, Islam is perhaps the first social system to institute consultation as an integral part of political process and to formally incorporate it into its system. The institution of *al-Shura* is enshrined in the noble Qur'an and it has been practised since the rise of the first Islamic state in al-Madinah. To emphasize its importance, a whole *surah* is named after it. In this *surah*, we read the following attributes of the believers:

Those who avoid the greater sins and illegal sexual intercourse, and when they are angry, they forgive. And those who answer the call of their Lord and establish prayer and who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation, and who spend what we have bestowed on them (42:37-38).

In Islam dialogue applies to all situations of life and is found at all levels of human relation. It is not restricted to conflict resolution alone, and this is why Islam can claim to be truly a religion of dialogue. And this is not an empty slogan or a declaration on paper, but it is a principle which has been adhered to and practised throughout the history of Islam. As will be seen later, Islamic history is replete with instances where fair and constructive dialogue was preferred by Muslim leaders. In fact, this is a rule in Islam, that armed conflict would not be

restored to until avenues of peace are exhausted. The guiding principle in this respect is the following divine command:

But if they incline to peace, you also incline to it
(8:61).

Dialogue in Conflict Resolution

Islam's view of war is that it is a necessary evil to be resorted to only when it is absolutely unavoidable. The purpose of war in Islam is the establishment of peace and freedom, if those can be achieved without resorting to war, then there is no need for war. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said in a *hadith*:

O people! Do not wish for an encounter with the enemy. Pray to Allah to grant you security; but when you (have to) encounter them, exercise patience. (al-Bukhari, 1985).

Therefore, Islam makes provisions for avoiding war, minimizing its effects if it unavoidably occurs and ending it as soon as possible. These provisions are based on agreement between Muslims and their enemy to be strictly adhered to by both sides. Islam seriously warns its followers against breaking agreements or acting in a treacherous manner towards their enemy. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said:

No people would break a treaty except that Allah has made their enemy to prevail over them (Imam Malik, n.d.).

One of the said provisions is *amaan*, or protection, which is the suspension of the legality to kill an enemy, enslave him or take his property. The purpose of *amaan* is to make possible dialogue between warring nations and enhance communication by allowing a free flow of ideas and views (Labdo, 1998). This provision will offer warring sides an opportunity to interact in an atmosphere of

mutual trust, talk to each other and, hopefully, reach a peaceful settlement of their dispute.

Another provision is *isti'maan*, asylum, which is the act of guaranteeing the safety of an individual from a hostile country to enter Muslim territory for a purpose after which he is to return to his country, on the condition that he remains subject to Islamic rule for the duration of his stay. The difference between *amaan* and *isti'maan* is that the former can be granted to a number of people or to an entire population in their own land, while the latter is given only to individuals with stipulation that they remain in the Islamic territory.

Sulh, or peace treaty, is another avenue for peace created by Islam in order to give a chance for negotiation and dialogue for peaceful resolution of conflicts. It means an agreement reached between warring factions for peace either permanently or for a very long period. All people under the above three categories of agreements are guaranteed freedom of faith and protection of their lives, honour and property.

Even after the start of a war, Islam leaves wide-open channels for negotiation and eventual peace. The provision of *muhadannah*, or truce, is meant to serve this purpose. *Muhadannah* is an agreement reached between Muslims and their enemy to cease hostilities for a short period of time after the battle has already begun. This measure is designed to afford the two sides opportunity to take stock of the war and re-examine their options and priorities. It is also an open invitation to the warring parties to sit around the negotiating table and try to resolve their differences through dialogue and fair arguments (Labdo, 1998).

Examples abound in Islamic history where these principles were put to good use thereby saving lives and avoiding the catastrophe of war.

Even before the dawn of his prophetic mission, Muhammad, peace be upon him, had displayed great diplomatic ability and capacity to resolve disputes peacefully and affect reconciliation between mutually antagonistic people. A notable example is the serious dispute which broke out between Arab chieftains

when the Quraish leaders rebuilt the holy sanctuary of Ka'aba. The dispute arose as a result of disagreement on whom among the Arab tribal leaders would have the honour of putting the black stone (*Hajar al-Aswad*) in its place. The dispute was so serious that war seemed imminent. The Prophet, who was then a young man of 35, was able to solve this stalemate to the satisfaction of all when he placed the stone on his garment and asked each tribal leader to hold a tip of the garment and they carried it together. On reaching its designated location, he lifted the stone with his own hands and put it in place. Thus, he cleared a potentially explosive situation which could have degenerated into a bloody war with devastating consequences (Ibn Kathir, n.d.).

Another important example is the famous treaty of Hudaibiyyah, in the 6th year after Hijra. The Prophet had gone to Makkah with his companions intending to perform *Umrah* (the lesser Hajj). Makkan authorities thought that he had come to conquer the city and they made preparations for war. Tempers flared when the Muslims realized that the pagan Quraish leaders would not allow them to enter the city and observe their rites. There were heated negotiations which resulted in a treaty that was unfair to Muslims because it imposed unfavourable conditions on them. Tensions rose high and danger was imminent but for the great restraint and statesmanship showed by the Prophet who was able to persuade the Muslims to accept the treaty. This treaty later proved to be a great victory for Islam (Ibn Kathir, n.d.).

Successive generations of Muslim leaders followed the Prophets' example. This became an established norm and was incorporated into the Shari'ah. Throughout Islamic history, beginning with the time of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, through the middle ages and down to the modern era, Muslims consistently championed the cause of peace and opposed military adventure. They always preferred negotiations and peaceful settlement of disputes.

Conclusion

Humanity is in spiritual poverty today. Mankind has attained the highest level of material progress but we are bankrupt spiritually. We are civilized, yes, but yet we are primitive and barbaric. This is why the 20th century which saw the greatest achievements in science, technology and material well-being also witnessed the bloodiest conflicts in human history. Secular philosophies, ideologies and social systems have failed mankind. Today, men have no peace or happiness.

For the above reason, sensible men and women all over the world are turning their backs on secularism and looking for some form of spirituality. Even in the United States, the bastion of unbelief, social philosophers like Francis Fukuyama, are calling for a return to spiritual values. The need for spirituality is felt more in the sphere of war and armament where the “Godless man” has become baser than beast, destroying human life, animal and plant life, the environment and indeed threatening to put an end to life on this planet. In the new world order of petty tribal wars (Africa), ethnic cleansing (Europe) and sheer arrogance and Godlessness (America), men have no refuge but to hold fast to the rope of Allah.

Islam, which means peace, offers an alternative to war. Its culture of dialogue, if properly utilized and applied to contemporary situation, will surely help minimize the bloody conflicts that are raging in all parts of the globe. Mechanisms for peace devised by Islam, such as the provisions of *amaan*, *isti'maan*, *sulh* and *muhadannah*, if allowed to work, will put an end to war and ensure just peace, and the much sought-after but elusive international security will finally be ours. They may even save humanity from the catastrophe of nuclear war.

References

The Noble Qur'an, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali, Daar al-Salaam, Pakistan, n.d.

al-Bukhari, Muhammad bin Isma'il, *al-Jami' al-Sahih*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Daar al-Arabiyyah, Beirut, 1405/1985.

Ibn Kathir, Ismail bin Umar, *al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, Maktabah al-Ma'arif, Beirut, n.d.

Labdo, Umar Muhammad, *Diplomacy and War in the Sokoto Caliphate*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 1998.

Malik bin Anas, *al-Muwatta*, Daar al-Fikr, Beirut, n.d.