

APPROACH TO THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY: THE GHANAIAN ULAMA SPEAK OUT

by
Dr. M. Sey
Religious Studies Department
University of Cape Coast

Abstract

The current study attempts to answer the question: What should Muslims in Ghana do in order to progress? In the endeavour to find the answer, prominent Muslim leaders, especially the ulama, were interviewed. These leaders seem to agree that disunity among the Muslims of different tribal background, lack of proper education which can cultivate Islamic awareness as well as the relevant knowledge and skills suitable for the current situation, lack of proper attitude and skills in organisation management and inadequate and poor management of fund tend to hold back the pace of development of the Muslims in Ghana.

The following pages represent the responses of selected Ulama in Ghana on the measures necessary to be taken by Muslims in order to progress from the present low level participation in national affairs. The survey was conducted between the months of February and August 1996. The question I put to the ulama was simple and straight forward. What should we do as Muslims in order to progress.

Among the dignitaries I spoke to in the north was al-Hajj Abdullah Adam, Chief Imam of Tamale. He is a person noted for his piety, learning and understanding. His response to my question was short and to the point : "If we Muslims want to progress then we should shun greed and jealousy".¹ Which such a response coming from a spiritual leader I took it very seriously and sought permission to leave since he was about to go out for a janazah prayer when I arrived. Muslims should therefore take this advice very seriously.

¹ Conversation with Alhaji Abdullah Adam, Chief Imam of Tamale, Northern Ghana, March 5, 1996.

Another person of repute I met in Tamale was Mallam Basha, the proprietor of Nuriya Islamic Institute. He has been at the forefront of the campaign to intergrate secular studies into the Islamic system of education and his establishment gives evidence of such integration. His prescription for the progress of Muslims in the country is that, as a matter of priority Muslims should return to the Quran and the Sunna of the prophet (SAW).² If we are able to do this with all sincerity, he stressed, the Almighty Allah will grant us the kind of progress we deserve.

He further made reference to the parable of a cow to be slaughtered and shared the next morning among some beneficiaries who had already made up their minds about the parts of the cow they would take. Before the next morning however, the cow broke loose and escaped. There was therefore no meat for the would be beneficiaries because the cow was no where to be found. The implication here is that if the beneficiaries want the meat they should first look for Islam and live honestly by its teachings.³

Mallam Basha further suggested that Muslims in Ghana can boast of seven million people out of a total population of fifteen million. Of this number at least three million would be in some kind of gainful employment. If therefore each and everyone agrees to contribute one hundred cedis a month, it would give us a handsome amount of three hundred million cedis to start any meaningful project for the benefit of society.⁴ It seems to me that if this prescription is taken seriously Muslims will surely make a headway Inshallah.

Mallam Basha's prescription for progress is three-fold – a return to the teachings of the Quran an Sunna as enshrined in the Prophet's farewell sermon,⁵ the integration of secular studies into the Islamic system of education and financial sacrifices for the benefit of society.

Sheikh Ali Fikree, the regional Manager of the Islamic Education Unit, Tamale, is of the opinion that Muslims are unable to progress because of the absence of unity among the various factions. He believes that if Muslims can forget their differences and unite, they will surely progress. He laments that there is so much selfishness among some Muslims which hinders progress. Unity he says has been consistently stressed in the Quran which says,

² Interview with Mallam Basha, Nuriya Islamic Institute, Tamale, March 5, 1996.

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ M. Sey : *Islamic Literacy Almanac*, Dept. of religious Studies, U.C.C., Cape Coast, 1996.

﴿١٠﴾ إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ أَخَوَيْكُمْ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ...

"The Believers are but A single Brotherhood; so make peace and Reconciliation between your Two (contending) Brothers." (49:10)

Peacemaking between the various factions therefore is a duty Muslims have to tackle as a matter of principle. Sheikh Fikree also laments the absence of any organizational set up that can command the respect of all the factions and to steer Muslims to progress. He advises that in terms of numbers Muslims should create the awareness that they are a force to reckon with and participate positively in national affairs⁶.

In Imam Rashid of Gumami Quarters, Tamale, I found him a potential leader without leadership ambitions. He had been chief Imam of the Ghana Armed Forces for some time before taking up his present position as a teacher and traditional healer running his own herbal clinic. He is of the view that if Muslims can forget their tribal affiliations and unite under a common denominator they will surely progress. He suggests that efforts should be made for the local training of the Ulama. This, he says would remedy the situation in which Ulama trained abroad return home with cultures different from our own to upset the prevailing conditions regarding the practice of Islam. The current misunderstanding between the Tijaniyya and Ahli Sunna factions is a case in point.⁷ He strongly advocates the establishment of a Theological Seminary to be affiliated to the University of Ghana or Cape Coast. He also believes that the leader of the Muslim community should be dynamic and independent of the Government but not necessarily anti-government.⁸

Mallam Hussain Zakariya is the proprietor of Adab Islamic Mission School at Nima. The school was established in 1965 and now has a preparatory and J.S.S sections. Mallam Hussain's recipe for the progress of Muslims in the country is four-fold. He believes, in the first place, that Muslims in the country should tackle educational problems very seriously and willingly combine both secular and religious in all the Islamic schools. Secondly, Muslims should develop a competent managerial capacity to enable them to adequately execute their programmes. Thirdly, Muslims should participate actively in national affairs and

⁶ Interview with sheikh Ali Fikree. Islamic Education Unit, Tamale March 5, 1996.

⁷ Clashes between the two groups of late have been of deep concern to the Ummah. Al Sunna members were attacked by the Tijaniyya group as a result of Al Sunna preaching which sounded outrageous to the Tijaniyya group.

⁸ Interview with Imam Rashid, Tamale, March 5, 1996.

be seen to be doing something positive towards national goals. Finally, Islamic ideals should be inculcated in the youth to ensure the practicality of Islam.⁹

In all cases adequate source of funding should be made available. On the last note Mallam Hussain has set the pace by encouraging the students to offer Zuhr prayer during the lunch break and Asr prayer on the school premises before they leave for home. This practice it seems to me, is a sure way to piety and progress in the right direction.

After the demise of al-Hajj Isaka Norgah of Accra in 1973, Muslim humanitarian activities sunk very low. There were some humanitarian activities here and there by men like al-Hajj Kadri English and Al-Hajj Maikankan in Accra and al-Hajj Bakomi in the north. There were also some individuals who were very generous and who would prefer to remain anonymous. These, however, were limited to the areas in which these individual lived. In recent years the person who has done so much to raise the image of Muslims in the area of philanthropy is Sheikh Mustapha Ibrahim, Chairman of the Islamic Council for Development and Humanitarian Services, Accra. His outfit has already sunk over seventy-five wells (bore-holes) in many parts of the country and hopes to do more by the year 2000. There are at present more than three hundred orphans in his care caring for their feeding, schooling, clothing and medical expenses. He is quick to respond to the call of a community in need. Many institutions have been beneficiaries of his outfit. In the *Daily Graphic* of February 19, 1996 it was recorded that the Osu Children's Home had received food items valued at 500,000 (Five hundred thousand cedis) from his outfit.

On the question of what Muslims should do in order to progress Sheikh Mustapha Ibrahim suggests that Muslims in the country should participate actively in all aspects of national life. He believes that if Muslims should make education their priority they would surely progress. He therefore suggests that Muslims should make use of existing government facilities for education and supplement government efforts by establishing more schools along modern lines. He further advises that the propagation of Islam should be the concern of all Muslims irrespective of occupation and not be left to missionaries alone. Finally, he suggests the establishment of a Central Fund, Baitul-Mal into which all Zakat monies as well as other donations should be paid for the benefit of the whole Ummah. Out of this fund, he suggests, the Imams could be placed on reasonable salaries to prevent them from depending on charity.¹⁰

⁹ Interview with Mallam Hussain Zakariya, Adab Islamic Mission School, Nima, February 24, 1996.

¹⁰ Conversation with Sheikh Mustapha Ibrahim, Chairman, ICODEHS, Accra, May 23, 1996.

Al-Hajj Shuaib Abu Bakar Umar of the Supreme Council for Islamic Call and Research, Accra believes that since education is paramount in the development of a nation, Muslims should make the education of their wards top priority and all shall be well. Also, since Islam cuts across tribal considerations Muslims should forget about their tribal affiliations and present Islam as one body not divided along tribal lines. If this is done, he believes, Muslims in this country will progress. Al-Hajj Shuaib also suggests the establishment of multi-purpose educational institutions in all the regional capitals, to supplement government efforts in the education reform programme.¹¹

From the suggestions so far it is clear that Muslims in this country ought to be up and doing in order to progress. The most important suggestion it seems to me is the call to return to the accepted teachings of Islam as represented by the Quran and the Sunna. Once this is achieved Muslims will surely progress in the right direction. It was the strict adherence to the teachings of the Quran and Sunna that enabled our forebears to attain great heights and by the same token Muslims of today can rise to great heights by following the examples of the Muslims of old.

The call to educate Muslim children in both secular and religious subjects should not come as a surprise to any one because Islam has from the onset encouraged education, the search for which is made obligatory on all Muslims male or female. A famous hadith of the prophet stresses that, "the search for knowledge is obligatory on all Muslims male or female".¹² The development of a competent managerial capacity to enable Muslims to carry out their projects should be taken seriously. The absence of this factor perhaps accounts for the fact that many Muslim organizations are formed from time to time but soon die before they can stand on their feet. As for the call to unite under a common denominator, it is duty of every well meaning Muslims. The scene is therefore set for Muslims to take a bold step into the twenty first century.

It is on record that Wa, as a Muslim community, has a tradition of Islam dating back to the sixteenth century.¹³ It is therefore not surprising that the elders there expressed grave concern about the lack of progress made by Muslims in this country. In an interview with the chief Imam of Wa, al-Hajj Yakubu Ishaque he expressed the opinion that Muslims in Ghana do not seem to progress due to the following factors :

¹¹ Consultation with al-Hajj Shuaib Abubakar Umar, Supreme Council for Islamic Call Research, Nima, Accra, February 23, 1996.

¹² Muhammad Azuzullah. *Glimpses of the Hadith*, the Crescent Publications, Indiana, 1972, p. 115.

¹³ Peter B. Clarke : *West Africa and Islam*. Anorld. London, 1982, p. 96.

- Mass illiteracy
- Disunity among Muslims
- Lack of organized missions

He explained mass illiteracy in the sense of the absence of secular education among Muslims. He believes that the lack of secular education among Muslims is the result of our own negative attitude towards secular education in both colonial and post independence Ghana. The present predicament of Muslims therefore is their own making. As a remedy he suggests that Muslims should initiate a comprehensive literacy drive in their communities and that importance should be attached to both secular and Islamic education. He further advocates the establishment by all Muslim communities of a compulsory fund (infaq) generate from every adult Muslim of means. Such a fund he suggests, could be used for the qualitative improvement of existing English and Arabic schools. Also, deserving poor Muslim students could be helped to pursue higher studies. The opportunities in all cases should be fairly distributed to both male and female. As a brief aside, he says that Muslim elders should discourage the premature marriages of Muslim girls to enable them attain great heights in education.¹⁴

Al-Hajj Yakubu further laments the present state of disunity among the various Muslim factions notably the Tijaniyya and the Ahli Sunna groups. This he says militates against the progress of Muslims in the country in the sense that efforts which should be geared towards productivity are wasted on trivial issues.

Finally, al-Hajj Yakubu intimates that Muslims in Ghana should organize missions with comprehensive programmes that will cater not only for the spiritual well-being of Muslims but also for their material welfare. The absence of such missions is a major factor which places Muslims behind in progress. Henceforth Muslims should have strong organization that will undertake religious, social and economic programmes. The zakat institution could be a good source of revenue for such programmes.¹⁵

The Yeri-Na (Sarikin Muslumi) al-Hajj Amora Sungumo, the overall spiritual leader of the Muslims in Wa gives a recipe for progress which ought to be taken very seriously. He stresses that in unity lies progress and therefore Muslims should endeavour to resolve their differences amicably in order to ensure in the country peace and stability without which progress is impossible. Furthermore Muslim leaders should exhibit honesty and integrity in all their undertakings. Dawah workers he says should not only concentrate the spiritual aspects of man's

¹⁴ Interview with Alhaji Yakubu Ishaque, Chief Imam, Wa, Upper-West Region, July 19, 1996.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

life but also they should initiate programmes that will improve the lot of Muslims materially. Finally, alms should be mobilized to undertake social and religious projects in the communities.

Al-Hajj Umar Sanda, an Islamic bookseller for the past several decades in Accra believes that lack of unity is the principal cause of backwardness among Muslims. He suggests that Muslims should endeavour to come together and forget about tribal differences. He advocates that all the regional capitals should have competent Muslims leaders who meet annually to deliberate on issues affecting the Ummah. No Muslim should envy another Muslim he concludes.¹⁶ He expresses reservations about monies collected in the Mosque for common projects and says that a new mechanism be developed for handling such monies.¹⁷

Al-Hajj Abdul Moumin Saeed is one of the prominent sub-Imams of Cape Coast and Regional Chairman of the Islamic Education Unit, Central Region. His recipe for progress is that Muslims should unite under one umbrella and come away from sectarian differences which have plagued the country for so long. He says that since all Muslims believe in one Allah, one Prophet and one Qibla there is no earthly justification why they cannot unite and forge ahead. Leadership struggle among the various ethnic groups should be avoided and a leader once elected should be respected by all in the interest of peace. He laments the disrespectful attitude of some of the foreign trained Islamic scholars who have actually kept the fort for so long. He believes strongly that as long as the new generation of scholars show no respect for the old guards progress is bound to be affected adversely. He says a Muslim whether Tijani, Wahabi, Izala, Shia or Ahli Sunna is a Muslim and should keep his or her sect to himself and speak as a Muslim.¹⁸

The suggestions so far dwell heavily on unity. This no doubt is the Quranic prescription. In Chapter 21 verse 92 it says :

﴿٩٢﴾ إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً ...

"Verily, This Brotherhood of yours is a single Brotherhood"

Any effort on the part of Muslims to unite is worthwhile and should be pursued vigorously. What needs to be stressed here is that Muslims should exhibit

¹⁶ Interview with Alhaji Amora Sungumo, Yeri Na and Sarikin Muslim of Wa, July 15, 1996.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Conversation with Alhaji Abdul Moumin Saeed, Chairman, Central Regional Islamic Education Unit, Cape Coast. August 3, 1996.

a high sense of integrity and honesty in all their doings. Discipline is very important in the life of every Muslim and this quality should be cultivated by every Muslim whether young or old. It should be recalled here that it was sheer discipline that won the Muslims the day at Badr in 624 AD despite all the heavy odds against them.¹⁹ It was also the absence of discipline that cost the Muslims dearly at Uhud in 625 AD.²⁰

The question of literacy should also be tackled very seriously. Efforts should also be made to cultivate the Islamic personality. This is possible through the cultivation of an Islamic mentality which is described by Fathi Yakan as the mentality that sees every thing in the light of Islamic norms.²¹ Islam therefore, Yakan goes on becomes “the gauge for all question, the solution to all problems and the reins for all affairs”.²²

Humanity, says Ali Nadwi, has many sides – physical, emotional, social, moral, mental and spiritual. We cannot neglect anyone of them for the benefit of the other.²³ To achieve real progress therefore, efforts should be made as Yeri Na Sungumo advocates, to initiate programmes that would cater for all aspects of human life both spiritually and materially. Ghanian Muslims should come away from mere resolutions without practical efforts towards attaining real goals. There should be more action to back all resolutions as Muslims march into the twenty-first century.

¹⁹ Muhammad Haykal : *The life of Muhammad*. American Trust Publication, 1976.

²⁰ M.A Rahim Muhammad : *In Prophecy and in fact*. Tripoli, 1975, p.53.

²¹ Fathi Yakan : *The problem faced by the Dawah and the Da'iyah*, WAMY Riyadh, nd. P. 110.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Abdul Hassan Ali Nadwi : *Islam and the World*. International Islamic Publishing House, Riyadh, 1992. p. 78.