

**ISLAM IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE ROLE OF MUSLIM YOUTH IN
COMBATING EXTREMISM AND RADICALISM FOR POLITICAL STABILITY.**

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UNIVERSITY FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES, TAMALE.**

DATE: FRIDAY, 5TH FEBRUARY, 2016.

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Senior Members of the University community, invited guests, ladies and gentlemen, I greet you with the Muslim greetings of peace: Asalamu Alaikum! The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is reported to have said: *Adeen Nasiha*, which means “religion is advice.” Advice is a conversation. And conversation is a dialogue in which the parties involved learn from one another. It is my hope that at the end of this conversation, we shall all learn from one another to the benefit of ourselves, our nation and our religion. This is a conversation about our collective future. It is therefore with excitement that I stand before you today to have this conversation about arguably the most topical issue in contemporary religious and political discourse: the issue of radicalism and extremism.

Mr. Chairman, you could not have chosen a better topic than this: *Islam in the 21st Century: The Role of Muslim Youth in Combating Extremism & Radicalism for Political Stability*. Islam means peace and submission to the will of Allah. Indeed one of the names of Allah is *As-Salaam*: The Peaceful One. From both the etymological and philosophical standpoints therefore, one cannot be Muslim, unless one enjoins others to peace. Today, we are faced with a global situation, in which it is difficult to convince others, that indeed Islam is a religion of peace. From Afghanistan to Australia to South Africa, the talk is about Islamic extremism. In my view, Islam is Islam. All the qualifying adjectives are a misnomer: “Islamic radicalism,” Islamic fundamentalism,” and “Islamic extremism.” To label them as such is to say that these are aspects of Islam. But they are not. For example, Islam is built on five fundamentals: to say the *Khalimat Shahada*, to say the daily prayers, fast in the month of Ramadan, pay the zakat and attend the hajj if one is capable of doing so. So anybody who adheres to these principles is a Muslim. And all of us do. So we are all Muslims. But we are not purveyors of radicalism, extremism and violence. The fundamentals of Islam are not about violence and radicalism.

But I can understand that these terminologies are used to refer to people who pervert Islamic values for achieving their political goals. Mr. Chairman as

young people, we ought to differentiate between Islam and the people who practice it. It is simplistic to say that when a Hindu commits an act, then that act must be Hinduism. Hinduism is distinct from a Hindu. So must Islam be differentiated from the acts of Muslims, especially when they are in direct contradiction to the principles of Islam. For example we all know that in 1994, there was a genocide in Rwanda that killed an estimated 800,000 people. The majority of the citizens of Rwanda are Catholic. But nobody said that Catholicism sanctions the systematic extermination of people. The reason that was not said, is that we all recognise that the problem was political, not religious. More importantly, Mr. Chairman, the safest areas of Rwanda throughout the genocide was the Muslim areas. The Muslim areas are the areas that people sought refuge. Why? Because Muslim Hutus and Tutsis never attacked one another nor did they kill one another. Why? Because of the explicit prohibition of the Qur'an: **"If a believer kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is hell, to abide therein forever; and the wrath and the curse of Allah are upon him, and a dreadful chastisement is prepared for him"** (Q: 4: 93).

The Youth, Islam & Education

Mr. Chairman, killing for no just cause, is a heinous crime in Islam. The Qur'an puts it this way: "...if any one slew a person, unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land, it would be as if he slew the whole people; And if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people..." (Q: 5:32). Therefore if people kill and maim others in the name of Islam for no just cause, it cannot be because Islam says so nor is it because they are Muslims. In this regard, groups like ISIL, Al-Qaeda or Boko Haram are cowardly criminals hiding behind the cloak of religion to undertake dastardly acts. What they do is evil, pure and simple.

Mr. Chairman, having said that, let me be quick to clarify that, I do not mean that Islam should not be seen in us. Indeed the misjudgments of Islam that I have enumerated are because people judge us by the values that we profess. So you cannot claim to be Muslim when you don't live the values of Islam. As young people, I urge you to live the values of Islam. The true values of Islam. I have already cited the Rwandan example to buttress this point. And the way to live the true values of Islam is to learn. "Knowledge" they say "is power." It is not consistent with the values of Islam for us to just sit and imbibe the

teachings of others. As Abdallah An-Naim argues, “...all Muslim men and women have the religious obligation to learn enough to decide for themselves and to express their views on matters of public concern.” The reason young people are being misled into radicalism and extremism is because they do not learn Islam from the sources: the Qur’an and the Hadith. And these are public documents that in the 21st century can even be accessed on the internet.

It is for no reason that the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said, “seek for knowledge even if you might travel to China” and also that “knowledge is the lost property of a Muslim; let him find it wherever he may.” It is against the grain of Islam, that Muslim communities in this country are some of the most deprived and places where illiteracy is highest. The period in Arabia before the advent of Islam is called the jahiliyya period, meaning the period of ignorance and barbarism. What it means is that Islam brought enlightenment. Therefore we must as Muslims seek enlightenment. It is our right and our duty.

Each one of us must play our role to ensure the enlightenment of our youth so as to save them from heterodox views that lead them to radicalism and extremism, which are against the grain of Islam. And education is key in this regard. It is in respect of this that we have given our commitment to ensuring

that education is strengthened so that the thousands of Muslim youth in the madrasas can become productive participants in the modern economy, while being good Muslims.

Development & Peace

One of the foremost reasons why young men and women fall into radicalism and extremism is the lack of employment. The pursuit of development for our Muslim communities should therefore be a major part of the search for peace in the area. Our Muslim communities have always faced a development deficit. The reality is that we cannot give hope to our teeming youth to win the respect of others if we do not make the socio-economic development of our communities central to our survival. Young men and women busy acquiring skills in school, earning money, creating wealth, moving up in their professions and owning property, would have little time or no tolerance for conflicts and violence.

The Northern Region is home to the largest number of Muslims in Ghana. It is also no secret that the northern part of Ghana has been plagued with recurrent intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts that have been increasingly violent. Like conflicts in other parts of our nation, these conflicts have many

causes: chieftaincy, land, religion and poverty. The constant and widespread disputes in so many of our communities that frequently lead to outbreaks in violence is one of the biggest obstacles to development in the north. These conflicts divert our energies, consume our resources and lead too often to the sad spectre of parents burying their young ones instead of being buried by them. Scarce resources that should be used in the important work of development, to give our young men and women education and to create jobs, to give the elderly security in their old age are consumed by factions in procurement of weapons and other means for the perpetration of violence and the disturbance of our common peace and by government in maintaining the peace.

Ancient disputes, modern weapons and communication tools conspire together to retard our development. Thus while young men and women around the world employ their gifts in solving technological problems and strengthening the global village, we divide ourselves, brother from brother, sister from sister and friend from friend. I know first-hand, that many from the north desire peace. I met a young woman from Yendi (which is predominantly Muslim) recently. In her brief moment with me, she held my hand and fervently pleaded: “when by Allah’s grace you are Vice President,

please stop the fighting and bring peace!" She was speaking for many in our communities across Ghana in areas that are Muslim and in areas that are non-Muslim.

Mr. Chairman, I dare say that in the 21st century, considering the ravages of poverty, disease, ignorance and violence that have plagued the world, the greater urgency is for us to take up the greater mission in fighting against the baser instincts of the soul, which is the cause of the problems of the world. For example, it is estimated that African countries lose about 148 billion dollars every year to corruption. I need not tell you what this amount of money can do for the development of our poor nations. Yet these amounts of money are stashed away in foreign accounts of thieving politicians. Corruption is actually a euphemism for theft. The only reason people steal so much money which they cannot spend is greed. It takes great striving to fight against the evil of greed, whose seeds exist in every human being. If we were to eliminate the evil of greed, we will eliminate a lot of the suffering that plagues our nations. It is the reason why the Buddha said that suffering is caused by selfish craving or greed.

As young people, you should speak against the evils of corruption. This is because the unemployment situation that faces us today, which has virtually

reached epidemic proportions, has a direct relation to corruption. The amount of money that this nation has lost to corruption can only be imagined. These amounts of money could have provided jobs for our teeming youth who roam the streets without jobs. These young men and women who finished university as far back as in 2006, who still do not have jobs. A large army of unemployed youth can easily serve as a recruiting ground for twisted ideologies. In Nigeria, Boko Haram never lacks a reserve of young, unemployed and disgruntled youth, who are ever willing engage to in extremism and radicalism even at the peril of their lives. Indeed they perceive themselves as living-dead. So to engage in radicalism and extremism which they are assured guarantees them a quick death and an even quicker entry to paradise is certainly an alluring prospect. We have a duty as Ghanaian Muslims to be on the guard against a similar prospect in Ghana.

The prophet Muhammad (SAW) is reported to have said that “when you see evil, fight it with your hands, if you cannot, fight it with your mouths, and if you cannot, hate it in your heart; but the hating of it in your hearts is the weakest of faiths.” Contrary to this prophetic admonishment, today it has become difficult to speak against the ills that go on in society. Those in power have disabled us from doing so, by sowing seeds of division amongst us on the

basis of ethnicity. So when people speak against the evils that threaten the stability of our nation, they are labelled as haters of a northerner or Ewe or Akan person or a Muslim or a Christian. I urge you, my brothers and sisters, to speak against evil. It is divine duty. The Qur'an admonishes us to speak the truth, even if it be against our fathers or our mothers. Let us heed this Prophetic call and shun all division. This is the only way we can guarantee the stability of our nation. We owe it to ourselves as young people and we owe it to the stability and future of our nation.

Islam & Extremism

Mr. Chairman, permit me at this stage to spend just a few moments on the issue of jihad and jihadism, which are the principal concepts with which our youth are lured into radical and extremist behaviour. There is a certain misunderstanding that, jihad means war. The word jihad comes from the root word, *juhud*, which means to strive.

According to Islamic teaching, humankind was created with the sole purpose of worshipping the creator (God). "And I have not created the Jinn and the men but that they may worship me" (Q: 51:56). In Islam, worship is a broad concept that includes every striving to please God. Thus an act of kindness to a

friend or neighbor or even a stranger is considered an act of worship in Islam. Therefore every act of the Muslim ought to be a *jihad* (striving) to please God. Mr. Chairman, indeed the Arabic word for war is *harb*.

Jihad then is neither *holy war* nor a frenzied campaign to spread the faith by force of arms, at least in its original canonical intent and cannot be used to justify radicalism or extremism.

Dangers of Exclusivism

Mr. Chairman, as young people we ought to guard against the evils of exclusivism. It is important that we realize that if Allah so desired He would have made all of us one people. But as He states in the Qur'an, He allows us to wallow in our differences, which He shall settle on the Day of Judgment. "There shall be no compulsion in religion" so states the Qur'an. Let us therefore respect one another's views on matters of religion. Intolerance in matters of religion is what breeds extremism and radicalism, which triggers political instability. In Ghana especially, the majority of the people live by the Christian faith.

There cannot be peace and stability in Ghana except us, as Muslims co-exist peacefully with our Christian brothers and sisters. What feeds extremism and

radicalism is the idea that there is only one way to God. While we are entitled to believe in the rightness of our way, we cannot seek to annihilate views that are opposite to ours. Radicalism and extremism are the product of exclusivism and intolerance.

Islam itself is very tolerant of Christianity. The first wave of Muslim migration to escape the persecution of the Makkans who opposed the nascent religion of Islam, was to Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia). At that time the Prophet advised his followers to migrate to Abyssinia because “a Christian King rules.” Indeed the Qur’an affirms the Islamic affinity to Christianity when it states that “you will find nearest to the believers those who say ‘we are Christians...because amongst them are men who are devoted to learning and monks and because they are not arrogant” (Q: 5:82). The Prophet is also reported to have stated that “both in this world and in the hereafter, I am the nearest of all the people to Jesus, the son of Mary...” (Bukhari: Vol 4: 434). When the Makkans sent a delegation to appeal to the Negus of Abyssinia to extradite the Muslims and when the Muslims were called upon to say why they should not be extradited, their Spokesperson, Jafar bin Abu Talib, quoted copiously from the 19th chapter of the Qur’an as his defense. The 19th chapter of the Qur’an is called the chapter of Mary (Suratul Maryam). Indeed Mary is

the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an and the chapter acknowledges the prophet-hood of Jesus, his special relationship with God, including the fact that he spoke from his cradle in defense of his mother when sections of her people thought that she had engaged in adultery; an incident that is not even mentioned in the Bible. The Prophet himself was to marry a Coptic Christian by name Maria and Allah subsequently made marriage between a Muslim man and a Christian woman lawful.

In Ghana, unlike our neighbours in Nigeria, we have largely lived at peace with our Christian brothers and sisters. We have a National Chief Imam who even opened the doors of our Central Mosque in Accra to Christians to renovate for us as a symbol of the co-existence that ought to be between us. The youth should emulate this example by the National Chief Imam who is an embodiment of both Qur'anic and Prophetic wisdom.

Mentorship

Mr. Chairman, having said that, it brings me to the all- important issue of mentorship. There is a Sufi saying which is attributed to the Prophet, that, "s/he who has no Shaykh will have the devil as his or her Shaykh." The Qur'an states that in the Prophet, we have an excellent model. The Prophet is

therefore the supreme mentor. But the people of knowledge are heirs to the Prophet. And there are many people of knowledge in our society, whose conduct we should seek to emulate if we are to save ourselves from falling prey to twisted ideologies that pervert the message of Islam for selfish gain. This requires youth who are themselves enlightened enough to discern the people worth emulating. Because of the pressures of the modern world, many of our young people have been left to their own devices. And it is this that allows them to fall prey to twisted ideologies. The story of intelligent, devout Ghanaian Muslim youth from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology who have been convinced to join ISIL, is a sad commentary on the state of mentorship in our country. I urge you all, to find people of faith and knowledge and attach yourselves to them, so that you are not persuaded by outsiders whose desire is to use you to advance their narrow, partisan political interests.

Mr. Chairman one of my favourite chapters of the Qur'an is Suratul-Asr (Q: 103). It reads: "By Time! Man is in loss; except those who believe and do good works; and exhort one another to truth; and exhort one another to patience." This chapter basically defines your role for you as young people in curbing the menace of extremism and radicalism and ensuring the stability of our nation.

In this chapter, Allah tells us that indeed we are a lost people, except we believe and do good works. It is significant to note that belief alone is not enough safeguard for us against the hazards of instability. We ought to do good works. We ought to enjoin good and forbid evil. To “exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to patience” is basically a lesson in peer review. In secular language, it is called peer influence. You need to strive to influence one another positively. We ought to be each other’s keeper. Let us watch over one another. Let us be guardians of each other. We ought not to lose our guard. And only you, the young ones can do this effectively.

It is okay for Muslim youth to involve themselves in politics. Contributing to the political stability of our nation counts as divine duty. The opposite of it is that contributing to the destabilisation of the nation must attract divine displeasure. Therefore Muslim youth should not be the ones that political parties use for violent activities. Often times, when political parties seek for young people to do acts of destabilisation, they recruit them from our Muslim communities or Zongos. This is a blot on our conscience as people who belong to a religion whose meaning is peace. At this stage, I want to make a direct appeal to our Muslim youth that in this election year, do not allow yourselves to be used by self-seeking politicians to engage in acts of political

destabilisation. Like the Muslim youth of Rwanda who refused to join in the frenzy of the genocide, we too can be good Muslims and remind those who seek to persuade us to debase the value of our religion that, we seek to be good Muslims.

The Value of Islam for Peace

Whatever value is in Islam, must be exploited for restoring peace to all areas of conflict in Ghana. The *Ulama* in Ghana ought to stand up and be counted as true heirs of the Prophet Muhammad. When the Aws and the Khazraj (two clans in Madina) were feuding, it took the intervention of the Prophet Muhammad to make peace between them. Subsequently, he drew up what has come to be known as the Madinan Charter that ensured peaceful co-existence amongst the inhabitants of Madina.

Umar ibn Khattab, the second caliph of Islam was stabbed to death. While dying, he prayed the Muslim community never to revenge his death by killing the one who stabbed him to death Abu Lulu 'a. Can we emulate this great example of Umar? We may be determined to seek vengeance for whatever wrongs that we perceive must have been done to us. But whatever vengeance we seek, will it be enough to assuage the hurt that we suffered? Or would we be able to seek equal vengeance for whatever wrong we perceive must have

been done to us? Again the Qur'an points the way. "The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah: for Allah loves not those who do wrong." (Q: 42:40). The youth cannot spend the greater part of their youth feuding and feeding the ego of politicians and those who profit from conflict. The stability of our nation is paramount and the youth are a key part of preserving it.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, invited guests, ladies and gentlemen! Islam in the twenty-first century is at a cross road. It is a sad commentary on the religion of peace, that today it is credited with being responsible for all the acts of radicalism, extremism, violence and destabilisation that take place around the world: from ISIL, through Al-Qaeda to Al-Shabab to Boko Haram. While we may meet in places like this and say that what they profess is not the true Islam, the reality is that we have allowed the extremists to hijack the religion of peace; we have allowed them to pervert its values; we have allowed them to define it. It has often been said that it is the silence of the righteous that allows evil to triumph. Let the good Muslims who practice the Islam of peace speak up. Let

our youth shun violence. Let our youth seek the path of knowledge, for it is the path of illumination. Let us concern ourselves with building a better future for ourselves here on earth and the goodies of the hereafter will follow. After all it is not for nothing that Allah urges us to pray and say: *Rabbana Atina feedunya Haasanatan, wa fil arhirati haasanatan, wakinnaa azaaban naar.* “Our lord, give us the best of this world, and the best of the hereafter and shield us from the fire of hell.” May the Al-mighty Allah bless the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his household and bless us and all those who walk the path of righteousness till the Day of Judgment. Amen. Asalamu Alaikum!