

12/06/2017

Some Thoughts on Islam and Interfaith Dialogue

Q&A with Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

Q: What do you see as the Islamic approach to peaceful coexistence, to dialogue, between people of different faiths?

A: The Quran (4:128) says *as-sulh khair*, which means ‘reconciliation is best’. According to Islam, then, our choice should be peace, not confrontation. The Quran (109:6) also says: *lakum deenukum waliyadeen* (“You have your religion and I have mine”). From this Quranic verse we can derive a very wise and practicable formula for peaceful coexistence of people and communities that follow (or claim to follow) different religions. And this formula is: *follow one and respect all*. This formula is reflected very clearly in the teachings of the Sufis, for instance. The Sufis believed in what is called *sulh-e kul* or peace with all. Peace with all, then, is a fundamental Islamic teaching.

Inviting people to God is a central concern of Islam, and this cannot effectively be engaged in without peace, without peaceful interaction with others. It is a duty to explain to people God’s Creation Plan. This work requires peace. It also requires interaction and dialogue with others. So, interfaith dialogue is also an Islamic imperative.

Q: Today, at the global level, people of different faith communities are in closer interaction than ever before. This proximity presents great prospects for collaboration for mutual benefit. But that can happen only if interfaith and inter-community dialogue is appropriately pursued. What, in your view, does Islam say about such dialogue?

A: Islam seeks to invite people to God, to lead a God-oriented life. This is in itself is a dialogue. It requires interaction with people. And when there are many people together, it naturally leads to dialogue.

The Quran has given a very practical method of dialogue—try to find a common ground between two or more parties and make this a starting point for dialogue. This principle is given in the Quran (3:64) in these words:

Say, “People of the Book, let us come to a word common to us that we shall worship none but God and that we shall associate no partner with Him and that none of us shall take others, besides God, for lords.”

Q: Some people may claim that Islam is a missionary religion and seeks to convert others and that, therefore, Muslims cannot genuinely engage in dialogue. What is your response to this?

A: Actually, every human being has a mission. Even secular people have a mission. This is a basic human trait. It is also a human trait that a person believes that he is on the right path. Without this conviction, it is impossible to live in this world. Without this firm footing, no one can do anything with full energy and enthusiasm. It gives one a firm footing. So, isn’t Muslims alone who think that what they believe in is right.

Dialogue, to me, should not be meant for converting people to one’s own faith. If it is not debate, dialogue always leads to intellectual development. Also, it promotes the spirit of acceptance of others. This is the spirit of dialogue. The purpose of dialogue should be mutual learning.

Q: Some people may claim that Islam can accept other People of the Book (*ahl-e kitab*) but that it has no such acceptance for others—what many Muslims term as ‘polytheists’, ‘idolators’ etc. Hence, they may contend that Islam does not envisage any possibility for dialogue and harmonious relations with people who are not conventionally considered by many Muslims to be *ahl-e kitab*. What do you have to say?

A: This is totally wrong. Islam does not command that idol-worshippers must be eradicated. It does not command that they either convert or face the sword. This kind of thinking is totally wrong.

Q: Do you think it possible for a person who believes in one religion to sincerely respect other religions—in terms of respecting all their practices and doctrines, even if some of

these may differ or even contradict the practices and beliefs of his own religion? If it is not possible, then what do you mean when you say one must follow one religion and respect all?

A: To respect other religions does not necessarily mean agreeing with every single practice, belief or claim in those religions. At the same time, it does mean acknowledging and respecting the goodness that is found in other religions, respecting people of other faiths as fellow creatures of God, and also respecting their right to follow the faith of their choice.

Respecting other religions is more a matter of practical wisdom. It is a fact that uniformity is impossible in this world, both in the religious and the secular fields. Given this, the only possible option is to continue to engage in dialogue between followers of different religions on the basis of the formula of mutual respect.

Giving respect to others is not a religious issue. It is, rather, an ethical issue. Even within a single religion there are numerous differences. Without tolerance or mutual respect, it is impossible to establish harmony even among people of a single faith. Thus, it is not only a question of interfaith relations. Rather, it's also a question that pertains to intra-faith relations. In both these cases, one should respect those who hold different views from one's own.

Q: The Quran clearly critiques some beliefs of certain communities, such as some Jews and Christians and the polytheists. Based on this, what do you think should be the Muslims' approach to discussing about other religions when they dialogue with their followers?

A: The Quran is not a book of dialogue. It is a book of statements. When you are issuing a statement, you can say what you wish to state and you are allowed to give a value judgment. But the culture of dialogue is very different. Dialoguing is not meant for issuing statements. Rather, it is for the purpose of mutual learning and mutual understanding.

Q: I'd like to explore deeper what you are saying in this regard. If you suggest that in the course of interfaith dialogue one should avoid criticizing religious beliefs and practices of others that one may not agree with, how do you relate this to the Quranic critique of certain religious beliefs and practices of some members of some other communities?

A: Condemnation is not the Islamic method. The Islamic method is based on *nush*, that is, speaking out of genuine well-wishing for others. If you are a well-wisher of others, then you have the right to speak; otherwise not. Speaking without well-wishing leads to *fasad*, or strife. It has no positive outcome. It is certainly not in accordance with the Islamic method.

***Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, a noted Islamic scholar, heads the New Delhi-based Centre for Peace and Spirituality. For more details, see www.cpsglobal.org**