

Preface

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“Islamophobia and the Challenges of Pluralism in the 21st Century” is a topic which attracts a wide-range of attention and interest. Indeed the relationship between Islam and the West matters more today than ever before: the rift between Islam and the Western world remains dangerously wide and the need for the two to accommodate each other in our increasingly globalized world has never been greater.

Religion is an indispensable prerequisite to sustain human life, a feature that has dominated our lives since time immemorial. It also plays an important role in shaping the cultural identity of individuals and communities, and constitutes a key component in the building of civilization.

The teachings of Islam constitute the basic code of ethics that guide Muslims in their daily lives, as witnessed throughout the history of Islamic civilization. These teachings include: moral excellence, honor, virtue, justice, piety, equity, compassion, and human dignity. Christianity and Islam share a common monotheistic vision and these basic teachings. However, despite this closeness and the fact that our histories are tightly linked — offering compelling reasons to live together and cooperate — much of that history has, too often, been marked by mutual hostility, giving rise to an enduring tradition of distrust and animosity.

We have been, and still are, looking to our past from different and, more often, opposite and contradictory angles, trying to disavow or ignore each other.

I do not think that theology and religion have been a major factor in this antagonism. To find the root causes of this persistent enmity one has to look elsewhere. Islam, since its inception, has venerated Christianity as a revealed religion. It recognizes Christians as “the people of the Book” and continues to show genuine and deep respect for the teaching of Christianity, and belief in the message of Jesus Christ is one of the pillars of the Islamic doctrine. Islam sees both Judaism and Christianity not as “others” which it has to tolerate but as standing *de jure*, as truly revealed religions from God. Moreover, their legitimate status is neither socio-political, nor cultural or civilizational, but religious. In this, Islam is unique, for no religion in the world has yet to make belief in the truth of other religions a necessary condition of its own faith. Islam does not see itself as coming to the religious scene *ex nihilo*, but as a reaffirmation of the same truth presented by all preceding prophets of Judaism and Christianity.

Muslims are committed to pluralism and tolerance. Muslims have played a pioneering role in acquiring knowledge and disseminating expertise in various

fields and sharing this with other civilizations. Under the long rule of Islam, non-Muslims enjoyed equity and justice. Based on the Islamic guidelines of social and religious pluralism, their institutions and places of worship were repaired and maintained, their personal laws protected, and their expenses were often paid from the public or state treasuries. As Karen Armstrong points out, “in the Islamic empire, Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians enjoyed religious freedom. This reflected the teaching of the Quran which is a pluralistic scripture, affirmative of other traditions. Muslims are commanded by God to respect the People of the Book, and reminded that they share the same belief and the same God.”¹ Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together under Islamic rule in Cairo, Jerusalem, Andalusia, Istanbul and many cities and towns throughout the Ottoman Empire, and communities flourished throughout the Muslim world.

One of the principal causes of the rising trend of intolerance against Islam in many parts of the world is ignorance, or if I may say so, lack of proper understanding of the Islamic faith, often rooted in a failure to distinguish between mainstream Islam and Muslims and the words and actions of extremists. In my own life as a scholar and now as the head of an international organization, I have had the chance of devoting some time to studying the philosophers of comparative cultural and religious beliefs and practices. I have come to the conclusion that every culture and religion has goodness embedded in it and all of these together have enriched human civilization. The pioneering work of Muslim philosophers and scholars in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, architecture, geography and jurisprudence, just to name a few have contributed enormously to shape modern day civilization.

Often text books in many parts of the West, while silent about the great contributions of Islam in the building of universal civilization, portray the two hundred years of crusades as a series of heroic tales of valor in which Western kings, princes, knights and soldiers managed to “rescue” Jerusalem from the wicked Muslim infidel. By contrast, the text books in many Muslim countries consider the crusades, which are known as the Wars of the Franks in the Islamic historiography, as an episode of barbaric cruelty and cold blooded carnage of Muslims at the hands of European soldiers of fortune. This is only one of many examples (which are far more deep-seated and intractable), that highlights the way in which many Muslim and Western societies build their perception of one another from a very early age.²

Today we must acknowledge that Islam is increasingly being regarded by some in the West as a threat, a source of intolerance, extremism, terrorism and as having declared war to destroy “Western” values. By contrast, the West is increasingly being regarded in the Muslim world as an arrogant imperialistic colonizer, prone to propagate Western materialism and mass culture, to destabilize and destroy Islam and to exploit the Muslim world’s potential while imposing its values and way of life on the rest of the world. Recently, certain newspapers in the West, under the guise of opening debate on taboo issues,

proclaimed that the West has been silenced by Islam, and found it fit to publish infamous cartoons of the Prophet Mohamed. However, the attempt proved to obscure rather than enlighten, while also being gratuitously offensive and condemnable. Such an approach pours oil on the fire, and merely reinforces prejudices on both sides.

This was also an occasion for some in the Western media to invoke the sacrosanct right of freedom of expression. Nobody can contest this right which is at the heart of any enlightened society. However, we see behind this approach an attempt of “will testing” which can only lead to a power struggle and emotional polemics. I firmly believe that one should recognize the inalienable right to freedom of expression, however it should be exercised responsibly and in a measured way.

The above depicts an untenable situation which should not be allowed to persist. What is now urgently needed is to discard this unbearable mindset of centuries-old prejudices and work towards harmony and understanding. Sadly, in recent years, the repeated calls for dialogue among civilizations have become empty slogans and seem to go no where. The reports of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and other international organizations, including Western institutions monitoring Islamophobia in Europe, warn of the emergence of Islamophobia, a new form of racism in Europe and America based on discrimination towards Islam and Muslims.

Based on this premise, I have called for a genuine historical and rational reconciliation between Islam and Christianity³, which will mark a new era in the history of mankind and human civilization. Similar initiatives were taken between Judaism and Christianity a few decades ago and have proven successful and productive. Suffice it to say that it resulted in putting an end to feuds and miseries that lasted almost two millennia. In proposing this idea, I would like to further develop the initiative taken by the Eucharistic Congress of the Vatican in 1965, which issued a document entitled, “The World of Light Encyclical; Dialogue between Christians and Muslims.” In this document we find support in favor of an Islamo-Christian dialogue, which for the first time acknowledges the value of Islamic faith, the favorable stand of Islam towards Christianity, and Islam’s contribution to the advancement of human civilization.

Neither Christianity nor Islam is monolithic, therefore reconciliation efforts should involve representatives from all sects of both religions along with all stakeholders such as scholars, thinkers, policy makers and the media. The thrust should be oriented towards promoting a mindset anchored in the moral imperative of each human being, and it should be a part of much needed pedagogy which fosters pluralism. This task must be supported and nurtured by international leaders and organizations. Education also has a very prominent role in this endeavor, supported by fair and objective media.

Under the present circumstances worldwide, there is need for greater efforts to create new opportunities for real rapprochement and mutual recognition and understanding, away from tendencies of mistrust and domination. Indeed there is no alternative, if one truly wishes to live in a peaceful world, enjoying positive coexistence with other cultures, civilizations and peoples. And this is exactly what Islam urges us to do. Islam teaches that we have been created as humans of different races and colors to reach out to each other and to respect each other for the common benefit of all.

Islam and the West could and should live and co-exist together in peace and harmony, as the common denominators that link them outweigh their differences. There are many facts which facilitate this reconciliation between Islam and the West:

Geographical Proximity: Islam and the West are close neighbours and destined to live together for a long period of time.

Similar Spiritual Reference: As part of the entire history of monotheistic religions, Islam is a continuity of Judeo-Christian traditions and culture.

Common values: There is no inherent conflict between Islam and modernity, and Muslims are committed to pluralism and the right of people to cherish their diversity.

On the basis of these facts, the root causes of the misunderstandings and conflicts should be addressed and assessed to come up with a realistic approach that might lead to a convergence of views. Together we should not allow the relationship between two great monotheistic religions and civilizations to be defined in mutually antagonistic terms and become hostage to radicals and extremists. The OIC stands ready to work for avoiding such a path, which is rife with disastrous consequences for global peace, stability and cooperation.

There are tremendous strategic common interests for the West and Islam which need to be developed and nurtured in the coming decades. Our world is going through a rapid development, with the possibility of the emergence of new world realities and new centres of power. This makes it all the more imperative for the Western and Muslim worlds to try hard to reconcile their differences, dispel misunderstandings, and look to the future with a new spirit. This is possible, and the OIC is authorized and committed to work to that end.

Endnotes

¹ Armstrong, Karen. "The Curse of the Infidel" The Guardian. 20 June 2002. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/jun/20/religion.september.11>.

² Based on a speech by HRH Prince Charles. *Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies*. 27 October 1993.

³ I made the call for a historic reconciliation between Islam and Christianity at my lecture at the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI) entitled "Is Islam an Intruder to Europe?" on 29 January 2007 and repeated it, inter alia, at the inaugural session of the high level segment of the UN Human Rights Council on 10 March 2007, at the International Conference jointly organized by the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the General Secretariat of the Organization of the Islamic Conference under the title of "the Role of Media in the Development of Tolerance and Mutual Understanding" which was held in the capital city of Azerbaijan, Baku on 26-27 April 2007, in my International Day of Tolerance message on 16 November 2007, and in my Lecture at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies on 28 April 2008.