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Title : WHO SPEAKS FOR ISLAM? WHO SPEAKS FOR THE WEST?

1. It has been our pleasure to welcome, over the past couple of days, the coming together of world leaders both former and present, leaders of the UN and the OIC, scholars of Islam, politicians, and friends of peace. I welcome you all once again to the beautiful city of Kuala Lumpur.

2. I notice that you have chosen as the logo of this conference, the twin towers of our capital city illuminated through the archway of the Alhambra, that famous mosque in the city of Granada. I recall also that Granada was the venue for a similar interfaith dialogue held some years ago. It is an apt symbol, for it recalls the five centuries of peace and harmony enjoyed by Muslims, Jews and Christians alike under the rule of Islam in Spain.

3. We feel that this climate of religious tolerance and understanding has also come to be associated with Malaysia. Since our independence in 1957, we have for the most part of our history maintained peace and harmony by celebrating, rather than rejecting, our own deeply held religious, cultural and ethnic heritage and diversity. I am told that this spirit of cooperation and understanding was also very much in evidence in presentations and discussions that have taken place here over the past few days.

4. We live in very troubled times. The spectre of terrorism and violence has changed the world we live in, ever since that fateful day when the twin towers in New York were brought down by terrorists claiming to speak in the name of Islam.

5. Almost five years have passed since then. Today, we are witnessing a world that is increasingly fractured. The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq have not eliminated terrorism and violence. Indeed, the level of violence has arguably heightened since. Tensions in Palestine have not abated, and the election of Hamas to the Palestinian parliament has been greeted with great wariness and trepidation in many parts of the world. In many parts of the world, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are becoming increasingly fraught with tension and mistrust.

6. More recently, we have seen how the fraying relations between Islam and the West have contributed to the decay in civility and the rise of intolerance. The publication of caricatures vilifying the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper last September, and their subsequent reproduction in various dailies in a number of other countries, have brought into sharp focus the rising tensions in Muslim-West relations.

7. Many have argued that the media was merely exercising its right to free speech, that no subject or issue should be beyond critique or satire. Other European

newspapers, in a show of solidarity, have chosen to reproduce those caricatures. It did not matter that the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad in those caricatures amount to atrocious blasphemy in the eyes of Muslims, radical or otherwise. It did not matter that the caricatures were clumsy in its portrayal of Islam as a fundamentally violent religion, which is in total opposition to the peaceful nature of Islam. It did not matter that the very same people and governments who found little wrong with the cartoons, suddenly had great issue when Iranian papers chose to demonstrate a "tit for tat" gesture with cartoons of the Holocaust.

8. On the other side of the fence, unfortunately, there are many Muslims who have responded to the provocation with violence and unfettered anger. The burning of consulates and embassies, vandalism and violent protests are not the way of Islam. In fact, such responses merely add fuel to bonfire of "Islamophobia" which has been kept burning ever since the tragedy of 9/11. In doing so, these protesters have allowed the Western media to turn to their audiences and say "I told you so."

9. I said that we are living in troubled times. We are also living in very confused times. There are many snarling voices in the world today, claiming to speak on behalf of their constituencies. In reality, these voices are the twisted provocations of unsound minds, playing on the prejudices and fears of an ignorant public to further their own ruthless agenda. And the public, drowned in the rising tide of mistrust and misunderstanding, have been swept along into the currents of anger and hatred.

10. Thus the theme of this conference becomes ever more important, a question that we all need to ask ourselves: "Who speaks for Islam? Who speaks for the West?"

11. The terrorist who straps a bomb to his chest and blows up a shopping mall: does he speak for Islam? The angry young man who burns down the flag of an occupying power, hissing with anger and fury: does he represent the Muslim world? At the same time, the newspaper editor who sees fit to ridicule a holy prophet who is venerated by more than 1 billion people around the globe: does he speak for the West? The anonymous internet blogger who calls Islam a fascist religion: does he speak for the West?

12. Unfortunately, it is these angry voices that are taking centre stage and drowning out the reasoned and cultured voices of many tolerant and moderate Muslims and Westerners. We have allowed them to speak for us. The silent majority, have either been silenced, or have chosen to remain so for fear of speaking up to prevailing wisdom. As a result, the silent majority looks on as the extremist and intolerant minority takes over and turns the civilisational dialogue between Islam and the West into an angry and ugly shouting match.

13. Even in the best of times, malicious provocation can unruffle feathers and lead to tempers flying. What I find unsettling is that the rising level of intolerance and provocation is being set within an increasingly combustible context of civilisational mistrust.

14. Religions have throughout history played a positive role. They have been positively instrumental in the creation of an ethical and moral society and high

civilization. This is not to say, however, that conflicts never existed. In particular, we find that the Muslim and Western traditions each hold differing worldviews, both traditions rich with their own philosophical foundations and coloured by their own unique historical experience.

15. In the West, for example, the rise of secularism as the dominant worldview has been accepted by a majority of the population. By this we do not just mean the simplistic division between Church and State. Nor do we mean, by secularism, religious neutrality. Rather, by secularism we mean the erosion of spiritual and moral values in all religious traditions and in all aspects of societal life. We know that modern intellectual tradition in continental Europe today is much informed by strong anti-clerical sentiments, a phenomenon derived from the revolutions of the 19th century that dismantled the privileges and political power of the Catholic Church.

16. It is because of these trends we find that, increasingly, it has become politically incorrect to include God in the equation of day-to-day life in the West. I have even heard that it is now more correct to say Happy Holidays rather than Merry Christmas, for the fear that the word 'Christ' may cause discomfort in some circles.

17. In contrast, Islam sees the process of secularisation as a corruptive influence and a pernicious enemy. Indeed, Islam's philosophical opposition to secularism puts it in intellectual opposition to the West, and presents an opportunity for malicious provocateurs to incite conflict and hatred.

18. Unfortunately, the seeds for mistrust and misunderstanding between Islam and the West are not just philosophical in nature. They are nourished by real injustices in the day to day lives of Muslims in certain parts of the world. The occupation of Palestine and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq are thorns in the flesh of the Muslim ummah, and the feeling of oppression and injustice arising from these geopolitical flashpoints will continue to poison the atmosphere of Muslim-West relations.

19. What is apparent is that there are philosophical and geopolitical tensions that exist between the Muslim and Western traditions. However, in spite of the prevailing environment today, I believe a clash of civilisations is not inevitable. We must recognise that there are fundamental fault lines between the Muslim and Western worldviews which must be delicately addressed if we are to avoid falling into the trap of mutual hatred and bigotry.

20. Tensions will arise and conflict will occur if the conceptions of morality of one dominant civilization and religion are forced upon other civilizations and religions. The globalised world has made it so much easier for us to know one another, but it has also made it easier for one strong world view to dominate the other. We must not only pay lip service to the idea that all that is held sacred by the "the other" deserves equal respect alongside our own beliefs. We must emphasise multilateralism rather than unilateralism, and we must put dialogue rather than the use of force on the top of our agenda.

21. What is required, therefore, is for us to continue fostering reasoned and civilised dialogue between Islam and the West. The Holy Qur'an reminds Muslims that Mankind was created from a single pair of male and female and made into nations and tribes in order that we may know each other and not that we may despise each other (Al-Hujurat verse 13).

22. This is why conferences such as this one are of paramount importance. We must not delude ourselves into thinking that solutions have been arrived at or that answers have been provided. Indeed, part of the solution lies in the process itself. Muslims will recall the advice of their beloved Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace, who said to "trust in God, but tie your camel"—we must not only trust in the Almighty but we must take action and make efforts before we can expect to see any results.

23. Let me also emphasise that we must also endeavour to extend this dialogue beyond the realm of the intelligentsia. It is important to encourage the intellectuals and the scholars of both Islam and the West to meet and share ideas; it is absolutely vital to ensure that those ideas are then disseminated and explained to the wider public.

24. The only way to do this effectively is through proper education and knowledge. Only then can the golden rule of all religions be truly recognized. For Muslims, that "no one is a believer until he desires for his neighbour that which he desires for himself". For Christians, that "whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them". And for Jews, that "what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour". It is the responsibility of scholars and intellectuals on both sides to educate and remind the public of this golden rule, and to sow the seeds for greater tolerance and understanding between the Muslim and Western traditions.

25. It is in this spirit of tolerance and understanding that Malaysia, under the guidance of Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, has chosen the approach of Islam hadhari or civilisational Islam, since Islam is a religion that contributes toward human civilization at all times in history. The Islam hadhari framework reminds us that Islam compels us to acquire knowledge so that we can improve ourselves and our ummah and develop the country, thereby further enhancing the position of Islam. There is no room for intolerance and bigotry in the framework of Islam hadhari, and the peace and harmony that is now enjoyed by Malaysians is a result of this understanding and approach to Islam and its principles.

26. Islam has always emphasised the importance of peace and brotherhood. The late Dr Zaki Badawi, who was a renowned scholar and an indefatigable advocate for interfaith dialogue in the UK, once reminded us: "Central to the message of the

Prophet is the equality of the human race. The Muslim creed that there is no god but Allah is reflected in its social perception that there is no tribalism but universal unity of humankind.”

27. The Prophet Muhammad himself, showed the way centuries earlier, in bridging the great divide among religions. In a well-known Hadith, it was observed that the Prophet stood up as a funeral procession for a Jew passed in front of him. He did so because in the eyes of Islam, all of us are servants of God and deserve respect when returning to our Creator.

28. I mentioned earlier that Granada was, for five centuries, an oasis of tranquility and harmony among the People of the Book. The challenge before us is to relive that spirit of tolerance and dialogue in that age long gone. Let us celebrate the universal unity of humankind by continuing our efforts to build bridges between Islam and the West. Let us embark upon this journey, so that we may build a new garden of peace here in the 21st century. We must begin now and do this together.