

**OPENING ADDRESS BY
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RELIGION IN THE QUEST FOR
GLOBAL JUSTICE AND PEACE
AT HOTEL RENAISSANCE, KUALA LUMPUR
24 JULY 2008**

BISMILLAHIR RAHMANIR RAHIM

ASSALAMUALAIKUM WARAHMATULLAHI WABARAKATUH AND GOOD MORNING

DISTINGUISHED SPEAKERS AND SESSION CHAIRS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

1. I WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE ORGANISERS FOR INVITING ME TO DELIVER THE OPENING ADDRESS FOR THIS IMPORTANT CONFERENCE. THIS CONFERENCE COMES AT AN IMPORTANT TIME, WHEN THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE GLOBAL ARENA CAN SOMETIMES SEEM VERY ELUSIVE.

2. IN THIS MODERN AGE, SOME FIND IT EASY TO DISMISS THE ROLE OF RELIGION. OFTEN, SECULAR THINKERS DISMISS RELIGION AS THE MERE VESTIGES OF A BYGONE AGE OF SUPERSTITION AND IRRATIONAL BELIEFS. BUT EVEN TODAY, WE CANNOT DENY THE HOLD THAT FAITH AND RELIGION CONTINUES TO HAVE ON THE HUMAN PSYCHE. FOR MUSLIMS, WE BELIEVE THAT FAITH AND RELIGION ARE PART OF THE HUMAN "FITRAH" – THE NATURAL, INNATE CHARACTER OF MANKIND AS INTENDED BY THE CREATOR.

3. THIS CONFERENCE IS PREDICATED ON THE BELIEF THAT RELIGION HAS A VERY SIGNIFICANT ROLE TO PLAY IN THE GLOBAL QUEST FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE. GLOBAL JUSTICE AND PEACE – BY ITS VERY DEFINITION – DEMANDS THE COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOUR OF THE ENTIRE HUMAN FAMILY. GIVEN WHAT WE KNOW OF THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH AND RELIGION IN THE HEART AND MINDS OF MEN, WE CANNOT ESCAPE THE CONCLUSION THAT THE CREATION OF A JUST AND PEACEFUL WORLD ESPECIALLY REQUIRES THE COLLECTIVE COOPERATION OF ALL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES.

4. ON THAT NOTE, I AM GLAD THAT THIS CONFERENCE HAS BROUGHT TOGETHER INDIVIDUALS FROM DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS, ALL OF WHOM SHARE A COMMON COMMITMENT TO GLOBAL JUSTICE AND PEACE.

5. INCREASINGLY, INTER-FAITH MEETINGS HAVE BEEN ORGANISED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. CERTAINLY, THERE IS GREAT VALUE IN SUCH GATHERINGS, IF WE CHOOSE TO ACCENTUATE OUR COMMON IDEALS, AND ARE PREPARED TO SET ASIDE OUR DIFFERENCES IN ORDER TO GET THINGS DONE. BY FOCUSING ON THE CONCEPTS OF "JUSTICE" AND "PEACE", THIS MULTI-FAITH CONFERENCE HAS CHOSEN TO ADDRESS TWO CLOSELY-RELATED CONCERNS THAT ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO THE WELL-BEING AND PROGRESS OF THE HUMAN CIVILISATION.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

6. JUSTICE IS A CHERISHED IDEAL IN ALL RELIGIONS. JUSTICE IS THE GIVING TO EACH PERSON THAT WHICH IS HIS DUE; IT IS THE PRINCIPLE THAT HOLDS COMMUNITIES TOGETHER; IT IS THE IDEAL WHICH MAKES CIVILISATION POSSIBLE.

7. IN ISLAM, THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE IS CENTRAL TO THE ISLAMIC WORLDVIEW. THE NOBLE QUR'AN EXHORTS:

"O, YOU WHO HAVE FAITH! BE MAINTAINERS OF JUSTICE (AND) WITNESSES FOR ALLAH'S SAKE, THOUGH IT BE AGAINST YOUR OWN SELVES OR (YOUR) PARENTS OR NEAR RELATIVES; WHETHER THE ONE BE RICH OR POOR, ALLAH IS CLOSER TO THEM BOTH, THEREFORE DO NOT FOLLOW ANY PASSION SO THAT YOU CAN DEAL JUSTLY; AND IF YOU SWERVE OR DECLINE (THE RIGHT), THEN VERILY ALLAH IS AWARE OF WHAT YOU DO."

[SURAH AN NISA' AYAT 135]

8. WITHOUT JUSTICE, THERE CAN BE NO PEACE. THIS IS A TRUTH THAT ALL RELIGIONS RECOGNISE. THIS IS WHY, IN ALL THE SCRIPTURES OF ALL MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS, MANKIND IS EXHORTED TO RESIST INJUSTICE, TO REJECT AGGRESSION AND OPPRESSION, IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE PEACE. AND IT IS UPON THE FOUNDATION OF PEACE THAT HUMANITY CAN TRULY ASPIRE TOWARDS HAPPINESS AND HARMONY.

9. IT IS TRUE THAT IN THE QUEST FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, MANY INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS HAVE ABUSED THE NAME OF GOD AND RELIGION TO JUSTIFY VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM. SUCH EXTREMISM HAS BEEN OBSERVED MANY TIMES IN THE COURSE OF HISTORY, AND IS CERTAINLY NOT NEW TO OUR MODERN AGE. IN EACH INSTANCE, THE VIRTUOUS TEACHINGS OF RELIGION HAVE BEEN TWISTED AND MANIPULATED TO SERVE AN UNHOLY AGENDA. HATRED AND BIGOTRY ARE PROPAGATED ON BEHALF OF ONE'S RELIGION, FOR THE SAKE OF POLITICAL GAIN OR PERSONAL PROFIT. IN OUR OWN TIME, WE HAVE WITNESSED MANY INJUSTICES COMMITTED IN THE NAME OF RELIGION, INCLUDING THE OCCUPATION OF SOMEONE ELSE'S LAND AND THE DISPOSSESSION THAT ENSUES FROM IT. THIS IS SURELY AN AFFRONT TO THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON, AND A BLEMISH UPON THE FREEDOM THAT IS A HUMAN BEING'S BIRTHRIGHT.

10. OF COURSE, EXTREMISM IS NOT THE MONOPOLY OF RELIGION ALONE. AS THE HISTORY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WOULD EASILY ATTEST, THE MANUFACTURED CONCEPTS OF "ETHNIC SUPERIORITY" OR "NATIONAL PURITY" ARE JUST AS EFFECTIVE IN FOMENTING GENOCIDE AND VIOLENCE. BUT CERTAINLY, THERE HAVE BEEN FAR TOO MANY INSTANCES IN THE PAST AND PRESENT, WHERE THE VIRTUES OF RELIGION HAVE BEEN SUBVERTED FOR MISGUIDED, EVEN EVIL CAUSES.

11. IF WE REFLECT UPON THE EXTREMIST TENDENCIES IN THE SPHERE OF FAITH AND RELIGION, WE WOULD DISCOVER THAT INVARIABLY THOSE WHO ADVOCATE SUCH POSITIONS OFTEN HAVE A VERY SHALLOW UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHILOSOPHIES AND WORLDVIEWS EMBODIED IN THEIR RESPECTIVE FAITHS. THEY TAKE VERSES OUT OF CONTEXT, WITHOUT ANY UNDERSTANDING OF THE LARGER

HISTORICAL SETTING WHICH UNDERLIE SUCH VERSES. THIS DISTORTED PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGION BECOMES A CONVENIENT TOOL FOR THE PURSUIT OF POWER AND SELFISH INTEREST.

12. THE PHENOMENON OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM COMPELS ALL OF US, ESPECIALLY RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS AND INTELLECTUALS, TO PLAY OUR PART IN COMBATING IGNORANCE AND THE PERVERSION OF RELIGION.

13. FIRSTLY, WE MUST TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT THE RELIGIOUS CURRICULA IN OUR SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION SHOULD EMPHASISE THOSE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES, ENSHRINED IN OUR RESPECTIVE RELIGIONS, WHICH MAKE US BETTER HUMAN BEINGS. OUR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION SHOULD CONVINCING US THAT THE DIGNITY AND INTEGRITY OF ALL HUMAN BEINGS IS WORTHY OF OUR RESPECT. RELIGION SHOULD INCULCATE A TRULY UNIVERSAL AND INCLUSIVE OUTLOOK, NOT A MENTALITY THAT IS NARROW, EXCLUSIVE AND PAROCHIAL.

14. SECONDLY, WE MUST ALSO ENCOURAGE OUR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS AND INTELLECTUALS TO ENGAGE WITH THE WIDER PUBLIC. IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO PRODUCE INTELLECTUAL WORKS AND PRESENT PAPERS IN SCHOLARLY MEETINGS, IMPORTANT AS THESE MAY BE. SCHOLARS AND INTELLECTUALS SHOULD NOT LOCK THEMSELVES AWAY IN THEIR IVORY TOWERS. INSTEAD, THEY SHOULD BE PREPARED TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ON THE GREAT ISSUES THAT FACE US ALL. OUR THINKERS AND RESEARCHERS MUST BE PREPARED TO PLAY THEIR OWN PART IN BROADENING THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION, AND ITS ROLE IN PROMOTING JUSTICE AND PEACE.

15. THIRDLY, WE ALSO NEED TO AMPLIFY THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PROMOTING A UNIVERSAL AND INCLUSIVE DIMENSION OF RELIGION THAT FOCUSES UPON JUSTICE AND PEACE. JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA PRACTITIONERS IN GENERAL SHOULD DEEPEN AND BROADEN THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION, IN ORDER TO PLAY A MORE EFFECTIVE ROLE IN ADVANCING THE UNIVERSAL VALUES OF JUSTICE, PEACE AND COMPASSION WHICH LIE AT THE HEART OF OUR GREAT RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES.

16. FOURTHLY, WE MUST BE PREPARED TO IMPLEMENT POSITIVE RELIGIOUS VALUES IN THE GOVERNANCE OF OUR INSTITUTIONS, FROM THE GOVERNMENT ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THE BASIC FAMILY UNIT. WE MUST COMBAT THE PREVAILING PUBLIC MOOD WHICH IS SOMETIMES PREJUDICED AGAINST RELIGION, AND OFTEN VIEWS RELIGION AS FUNDAMENTALLY DIVISIVE. THIS IS WHY I HAVE PUT FORWARD THE APPROACH OF "ISLAM HADHARI", BASED ON TEN FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES WHICH DERIVE FROM THE UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES FOUND WITHIN THE MUSLIM TRADITION. I BELIEVE THAT WHEN WE STRIVE TO GOVERN OUR INSTITUTIONS BASED ON THE POSITIVE VALUES FOUNDED IN THE APPROACH OF ISLAM HADHARI, WE CAN TRULY DISPEL THE NEGATIVE PREJUDICES AGAINST RELIGION, AND FOSTER GREATER JUSTICE AND PEACE.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

17. EXTREMISM IS CERTAINLY ONE OF THE GREAT CHALLENGES OF OUR AGE, WHICH I BELIEVE CANNOT BE SOLVED WITHOUT RECOURSE TO THE GENUINE TEACHINGS OF RELIGION. THE OTHER GREAT CHALLENGE WHICH COMES TO MIND, IS THAT OF INEQUALITY.

18. THE QUESTION IS: CAN RELIGION OFFER SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL POVERTY AND DISPARITIES; TO OPPRESSION AND DISPOSSESSION; AND TO OTHER INJUSTICES THAT CAUSE SO MUCH PAIN AND SUFFERING TO MILLIONS OF PEOPLE?. MY CONVICTION IS THAT THE ANSWER IS IN THE AFFIRMATIVE.

19. IN ALL MAJOR RELIGIONS, THERE IS A CONCEPT OF THE "MIDDLE PATH". WE ARE ENJOINED TO LIVE OUR LIVES IN MODERATION – NEITHER ALLOWING OURSELVES TO BE SUBMERGED IN THE MODERN OPIATE OF HEDONISM; NOR RETREATING FROM THE WORLD INTO A SHELL OF ASCETICISM. AS QUOTED IN THE NOBLE QUR'AN:

"O, PEOPLE OF THE BOOK! DO NOT EXAGGERATE IN YOUR RELIGION OTHER THAN THE TRUTH, AND DO NOT FOLLOW THE VAIN DESIRES OF THE PEOPLE WHO HAD GONE ASTRAY A FORETIME, AND LED MANY ASTRAY, AND WENT ASTRAY FROM THE RIGHT PATH."

[SURAH AL MAIDAH, AYAT 77]

20. WHAT IS THE RIGHT PATH, ONE MIGHT ASK?. AMONG OTHERS, I BELIEVE THAT THE RIGHT PATH LIES IN DEDICATING OUR EFFORTS TOWARDS ERADICATING INEQUALITIES OF ALL KINDS. INDEED, THE YAWNING GAP BETWEEN THE VERY RICH AND THE VERY POOR IS UNCONSCIONABLE, FROM THE STANDPOINT OF EVERY RELIGION. THIS IS WHY I HAVE ARGUED FOR A NEW APPROACH FOR DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA; ONE THAT ENSURES EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL MALAYSIANS. IT IS AN APPROACH WHICH IS CONSISTENT WITH THE CONCEPT OF THE "MIDDLE PATH" – ENSURING THAT THE FRUITS OF DEVELOPMENT ARE SHARED BY ALL.

21. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW IN TACKLING CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES BECOMES EVEN MORE APPARENT WHEN WE REFLECT ON THE NATURE OF THE GRAVE GLOBAL CRISES CONFRONTING HUMANITY TODAY.

22. THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS THAT AFFECTS HUMANITY TODAY IS A CONSEQUENCE OF OUR COLLECTIVE FAILURE TO MANAGE OUR ENVIRONMENT IN A JUST AND EQUITABLE MANNER. FAITH AND RELIGION TEACHES US THAT WE SHOULD DEVELOP A HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ENVIRONMENT. SURELY IF WE TOOK HEED OF THIS APPROACH TOWARDS MANAGING THE ENVIRONMENT, WE WOULD NOT BE FACED WITH THE PROBLEMS OF GLOBAL WARMING AND VARIOUS OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES.

23. THE LOOMING FOOD CRISIS WHICH IS THREATENING GLOBAL FOOD SUPPLIES IS ANOTHER EXAMPLE. IT IS UNCONSCIONABLE THAT SOME PARTS OF THE WORLD ENJOYS AN ABUNDANCE OF FOOD, WHILE SOME OTHER PARTS CONTINUE TO BE MIRED IN POVERTY AND STARVATION. AGAIN, WE COME BACK TO THE CONCEPT OF THE "MIDDLE PATH".

24. WHEN I BECAME PRIME MINISTER ALMOST 5 YEARS AGO, I BEGAN TO TALK ABOUT THE NEED TO REVIVE FOOD PRODUCTION AND AGRICULTURE IN MALAYSIA. THERE WAS SOME SKEPTICISM THEN; BUT TODAY, I BELIEVE THERE IS A CONSENSUS AROUND THE NEED FOR US TO ENSURE ADEQUATE FOOD SUPPLIES, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WHO CONTINUE TO LABOUR UNDER THE SHADOW OF

POVERTY. THIS IS ONE EXAMPLE OF STRIVING FOR THE "MIDDLE PATH"- ENSURING THAT THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT LEAVES NO PERSON BEHIND.

25. IN ALL THESE CRISES – BE THEY ENVIRONMENTAL, ECONOMIC, OR RELATING TO FOOD SUPPLY – ONE OF THE UNDERLYING CAUSES IS THE MODERN PREOCCUPATION AND CELEBRATION OF GREED. THAT GREED IS DESTRUCTIVE IS ONE OF THE GREATEST INSIGHTS OFFERED BY RELIGION. RIGHT THROUGH HISTORY, WE HAVE WITNESSED EXAMPLES OF INDIVIDUALS AND NATIONS THAT HAVE BEEN DESTROYED BY THEIR GREED FOR POWER AND WEALTH. WILL OUR CIVILISATION ALSO DESTROY ITSELF THROUGH THE GREED OF A FEW?.

26. CERTAINLY, WE ARE FACED WITH A NUMBER OF CHALLENGES, SOME OF WHICH POSE AN IMMEDIATE THREAT TO OUR CONTINUED WAY OF LIFE. IT IS MY CONVICTION THAT WE CANNOT LOOK AT THESE PROBLEMS IN A VACUUM – FAITH AND RELIGION MUST CONTINUE TO GUIDE OUR THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS, AS WE CONTINUE TO FIND WAYS TO ENSURE A BETTER TOMORROW FOR OUR CHILDREN AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

27. THE ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN MUST ALSO BE CONCRETE AND EFFECTIVE TO TACKLE INJUSTICE AND INEQUALITY. ENHANCED FOOD PRODUCTION AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT – FOR EXAMPLE, THROUGH THE ECONOMIC CORRIDOR CONCEPT IN MALAYSIA – ARE JUST SOME OF THE TANGIBLE WAYS IN ORDER TO CLOSE SOCIO-ECONOMIC GAPS, AND THEREBY PROMOTE JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE WORLD.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

28. OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, YOU WILL COME TO DISCUSS AND DISSECT VARIOUS ISSUES FACING CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY. SOME OF THESE I HAVE ALREADY ALLUDED TO; BUT I AM SURE THERE ARE MANY OTHERS THAT YOU WILL ALSO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION.

29. I HOPE THAT IN THOSE DELIBERATIONS, YOU CAN COME TOGETHER TO FORMULATE TANGIBLE PROPOSALS, ANCHORED IN SHARED UNIVERSAL VALUES, THAT CAN BE IMPLEMENTED IN AN INCREASINGLY GLOBALISED WORLD.

30. YOU ARE ALL TAKING PART IN AN IMPORTANT QUEST – THE QUEST FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE AND PEACE. I WISH YOU ALL THE BEST IN THIS JOURNEY; MAY THE ALMIGHTY GUIDE YOUR THOUGHTS, AND GRANT US ALL MERCY AND PEACE FOR ALL TIME.

31. ON THAT NOTE, WITH THE RECITATION OF BISMILLAHIR RAHMANIR RAHIM, I HEREBY DECLARE OPEN THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RELIGION IN THE QUEST FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE AND PEACE.

THANK YOU.