

## **THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND CIVILISATION (ISTAC)**

JALAN DAMANSARA, KUALA LUMPUR (K.L), 4 OCTOBER 1991

In the name of Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful.

2. Thus do we Muslims begin everything, for we do nothing except in the name of Allah, the Compassionate and the Merciful.

3. Of the 99 attributes of Allah S.W.T., being compassionate and merciful are the two most often repeated by us. They surely must be the most important attributes of the only God that we worship, Allah S.W.T.

4. Yet, these two attributes are least common among men, the Muslims included. We are not merciful, nor are we given to much compassion, especially to those who in our estimation may have done wrong, particularly in the interpretations of our religion. As the Christians of old excommunicate, so do Muslims readily condemn other Muslims as heretics for the slightest differences of opinion or for questioning established dogma.

5. It is for this reason that I consider the founding of this Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation a brave enterprise. Faith and thoughts do not often go together. Indeed, faith implies blind unquestioning submission. On the other hand, thinking requires reason and logic, a process of analysis, enquiry and questioning which are certainly at odds with complete submission, i.e., with faith. On the other hand, a non-thinking society can create no civilisation. Islamic Civilisation is not the result of pure rituals of obeisance to Allah but was developed through thinking and applying the injunctions and guidance of Allah S.W.T. as a way of life. An unthinking society cannot establish a civilisation. Islamic Civilisation is, therefore, not a civilisation of unquestioning faith alone but a civilisation of thoughts and ideas based on the teachings of Islam.

6. If this Institute is to be worthy of its name then it must examine the religion of Islam as we find it to-day in order to find the rationale for the multitude of rituals and practices, the interpretations of the Al-Quran, the Hadith and the Sunnah, which together make Islam not just a faith but also a way of life, i.e., as Addin. If this Institute and those who participate in its activities are merely to seek or devise explanations for each and every practice, some of which as presently practised are incompatible with each other and are probably wrong and unIslamic, or if it is to try only to find a way out for the Muslims in a world that is no longer the same as that at the time of the Prophet, S.A.W., if it is to devote entirely to finding excuses for the obvious failures of the Muslims and their practice of Islam and to explain everything by speaking of rewards in the afterlife, then the Institute would not be an institute for thinking but would be merely for apologising for Islam. And this is an unnecessary exercise, for Islam needs no apology.

7. As to Islamic Civilisation, are we referring to the Golden Age of Islam in the past or the present day Islamic world? Some may define Islamic Civilisation by

the piety of the Muslims in the performance of rituals and not their worldly achievements. Others might think purely of their worldly achievements. If we do not define what we mean by Islamic Civilisation, we may end up discussing different things and so fail to achieve any sensible assessments or direction. In other words, we would be indulging in a futile exercise and would not contribute anything to Islam or the Muslims.

8. To be worthy of the title, the Institute must be prepared to analyse and to reason and to find reasons, not for the principle articles of faith, such as the bearing of witness to the oneness of Allah S.W.T., and that Muhammad, S.A.W. is His messenger, but for those other practices, rituals and values which make Islam a way of life.

9. Yet when this is attempted, the Institute is going to come in for much criticism and probably be accused of hearsay by those who feel that no reason is required, that all matters concerning Islam are articles of faith and faith alone. Even more vehement will be the criticism of those who interpret Islam as living in the 7th century.

10. The detractors of this Institute will have no such attributes of being merciful or compassionate. They will be even less merciful and compassionate when the thinking of this Institute clashes with their interpretations and undermine the hold they now have over the Muslim community through their teachings.

11. Islam did not come into this world in a vacuum. It came at a time of ignorance, in the days of the jahilliah. It came to enlighten, i.e., it came with a reason. Islam came to light the way for the jahilliah in Mecca and for the rest of humanity.

12. The enlightenment was needed for the jahilliah were among the most cruel and unprincipled people in the world of that time. They were given to female infanticide, to regarding women as mere chattels, to slavery and the extreme cruelty to slaves, to endless feuds and tribal wars, to human sacrifices and the worship of stone images, to an extreme fondness for praise, to avarice and to a whole series of other qualities which render them almost unfit to be considered as human.

13. At the same time the practice of the other religions of Allah S.W.T. which were taught by the prophets before Muhammad, S.A.W. had, deviated from the original teachings. Many had gone back to idol worship and to the practices which brought misery to their community. Priests had taken over the religions and placed themselves not just as the interpreters of the religions but as the intermediaries between God and the faithful.

14. This was the world to which Islam came. This was the world and the time when Muhammad, S.A.W. received his first message from Allah S.W.T. And the messages were all meant to restore faith in Allah and to create a better society, indeed a better and more human civilisation.

15. Islam came to show the way of life for the whole human race then and in the

future. More than any other religion, Islam was not to be just a way of worshipping Allah S.W.T., of prayers and rituals. Islam was meant to reshape the value system of the faithful and the whole human race and to instruct society on how to conduct its affairs, its administration, its laws and its economic and social life.

16. From the very beginning and throughout its teachings, Islam emphasised the need to acquire knowledge, to understand and appreciate the wonders created by Allah S.W.T. and therefore, to think. Obviously Islam is not just a faith but it relates to everyday life, explains it and gives guidance as to how to relate to it for success in this world and a better life in the hereafter.

17. Change was predicted for the future, the accuracy of which is truly amazing. Human society was not expected to be static but would be in a constant state of flux. And all these would not be without reason. And the followers of Islam must obviously change and adjust to new situations, for their continued success.

18. The Al-Quran is complete and covers every aspect of life. It gives guidance to the faithful. Through it the followers will know the correct direction and approach to solving worldly problems and mastering challenges. But this does not mean that the Quran will provide detailed answers to every question faced by everyone. Nor is the Quran meant to be the sole source of all knowledge. It enjoins the followers to seek knowledge. Knowing the contents of the Quran alone would not, for example, make a man a capable defender of the faith. To defend the faith, he must know the art of war, the weapons, the skills, the technology, etc, which he must learn elsewhere. The Quran directs him to equip himself with swords and horses i.e. the weapons of defence at the time. Clearly it would be futile in this day and age to depend on swords and horses.

19. When the followers find themselves lost, i.e., unable to resolve their problems they must refer to the Al-Quran for guidance. Guidance does not infer minute and detailed instructions as to exactly what to do. Guidance infers direction, the right approach, the right path. Knowing the direction, the faithful must apply their minds and think and resolve their problems according to knowledge, reason and logic. A Muslim may pray for guidance but he must also think and act in order to resolve the problem before him. To pray and leave everything to Allah S.W.T. is not the way of Islam. To say that the failures had been pre-ordained when the Muslims make no effort to achieve success is to put the blame on Allah S.W.T. And this, no true Muslims should do.

20. For many centuries after the death of the Prophet, guidance was sought from those close to him, i.e., the companions and the narrators of impeccable character. But with the passage of time and in the absence of specific Sunnah and Hadith, many questions of religion had to be determined through "ijtihad". The learned theologians had to apply their minds, after referring to the Al-Quran, the Hadith and the Sunnah for guidance, in order to resolve an issue. The "fatwa" that they make is the result of their thinking, and constitutes a part of religious belief by those who subscribe to the teachings of these particular theologians or "ulamas". Others will dispute the conclusion arrived at by this

group and believe in the conclusions and "fatwa" of other groups which may differ considerably.

21. Since it is seldom that two persons or groups will agree completely on any matter, the "ijtihad" often leads to differing and conflicting "fatwas". To complicate matters there were scholars and pretenders who allowed their own vested interests or those of their patrons to influence their thinking.

22. As a result, the single religion of Islam that was brought by the Prophet acquired different and frequently conflicting interpretations. Different groups of Muslims emerged who believed and worshipped in different ways. The Syiahs, the Sunnis, the Khawarij and Druzes and numerous divisions appeared in the Muslim world only to be divided further by the interpretations of different imams from each group at different times. Numerous "tarikats" appeared which preach practices which are questionable and differ radically with each other. The interpretations, teachings and "ijtihad" have divided up not just the Muslims but Islam itself as a religion. Islam had become many religions with many different practices and beliefs.

23. It was thought that the solution to further fragmentation and deviation was to stop "ijtihad" altogether. Henceforth, no one was to think or discuss Islam but to accept previous interpretations as dogmas without question. But this decision by some "ulama", learned and well-intended though they may be, did not resolve the problem of the continuing fragmentation of Islam and Muslims. Neither has it solved the problem of wrong teachings and interpretations which had created numerous groups of deviates. Certainly new problems in a changing world cannot be resolved.

24. Many of the teachings and interpretations of Islam as made by some of the "ulamas" and believed to be sacrosanct are clearly damaging to Islam and the Muslims. The state of the Muslim world to-day is the result of these tendentious interpretations. In the early years of Islam, the religion was acknowledged by all, the Muslims and the non-Muslims, as a great religion which converted the nomadic jahilliah Arabs into a great people with achievements not only in the spread of the teachings of Islam but in all fields of knowledge, the arts, the sciences, medicine, astronomy, etc. In other words, Islam converted a backward people into the founders of the greatest civilisation of all times.

25. If to-day Islam and the Muslims are reduced to depending on others for their skills and knowledge and even for their own defences, if to-day Muslims are forced to grovel at the feet of their enemies, helpless even to resolve the problem of the Zionists, it is not because of Islam but the interpretations of Islam by the frequently self-styled "ulamas" who emerged after the golden days of Islamic glory. It is these "ulamas" with their rigidity, their belief that this world is not for the Muslims, that the most important expression of "iman" is continuous rituals of obeisance to Allah, that what is sunnat and therefore is optional must be considered as wajib or compulsory; it is these people who have reduced Islam and the Muslims to the inferior status that they are now. Before the interpretations and teachings of these "ulamas", the Muslims were the most

successful people in the world who spread the teachings of Islam, built a huge Islamic Empire and created the Islamic Civilisation.

26. And yet these "ulamas" claim that they, all of them, whether self-proclaimed or otherwise are the direct successors of the Prophet. And just as the teachings of the Prophet may not be disputed, their teachings and interpretations of the religion may also not be disputed. They have gone so far as to say that any teachings coming from any other source, including the parents of the children, are the teachings of Satan.

27. There should be no priests in Islam, no interlocutor between the faithful and Allah S.W.T. But there is now effectively a priesthood which has arrogated to themselves irrespective of their qualification, the role of sole interpreters of Islam who demand obeisance to themselves. As they are human and can go wrong as well as being influenced by certain interests, many of them have caused confusion and deviation which do much harm to Islam and Muslims.

28. It is in this kind of Muslim world that you as thinkers are required to think, to examine Islamic thought and civilisation. You can choose not to disturb the status quo, to avoid controversy, to play safe. But if you do that, you cannot be doing any thinking and cannot be called thinkers. Only if you choose to think, to enquire, to acknowledge the miserable state of the Muslims and Islam, to reason and to criticise the accepted interpretation of the religion, to debunk and to reach conclusions which in the context of present practice may sound radical or even heretical and to declare your stand, only then would you have justified the role that you and the Institute are required to play.

29. I would like to warn you that if you dare to be honest, you will be charged with being heretical, by those who have accepted the present teachings and practices. This is a risk you must take. The risk is far less than that taken by the Prophet when he undertook to preach Islam. Of course you are ordinary mortals and can be wrong. Nor will you have the protection accorded by Allah S.W.T. to the Prophet. But the deviation in the teachings of Islam and the sad plight of Islam and the Muslims resulting from some of the present interpretations and teachings require that someone accept the risk, someone committed enough to Islam to set aside personal considerations.

30. Insyallah, guidance will be given to you in the task that you face. I and many concerned Muslims will be praying for you. With their hope and prayers I now officially open the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation.  
Wassalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.