

SEMINAR ON MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN MINDS

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I would like to thank the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) and the Goethe Institute, organisers of this Seminar, for inviting me today to deliver this address and to officially open the Seminar.

2. The organisers have made a good choice in selecting the topics which touch upon the main aspects of human life, namely philosophy and the state, law, education and family as well as economics. These topics should be critically analysed and examined through the mirrors of both Islam and Christianity, if we want to have a better understanding of the importance of religions to society.

3. Man is almost schizophrenic by nature, being both a physical person and a spiritual soul. The holy Qur'an has clearly described man's creation in two distinct phases. The first phase being the creation of the body or physical being from clay. The second phase is the breathing of the soul into the body of God's Spirit which completes man's creation. The relevant texts of the verses read as follows:

"We created man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape; while the Jinn race, We had created before, from the fire of a scorching wind. Behold! thy Lord said to the angels: I am about to create man, from sounding clay from mud moulded into shape; When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him". Al Hijr (15): 26-29. "Man did We create from a quintessence (of clay); Then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest, firmly fixed; Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood, Then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump, then We made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh, then We developed out of it another creature. So blessed be Allah, the Best to create!" After that, at length ye will die." Al Muminun (23): 10-15

3. This process of man's creation signifies three pertinent points. Firstly, the breathing of Allah's Spirit into man. This signifies that man is provided with the faculty of God-like knowledge and will, if rightly used, gives man superiority over other creatures. This also implies that man is created innocent, pure, true, free, inclined to doing right and to virtue, and endowed with true understanding about his own position in the Universe and about Allah's goodness, wisdom and power.

4. Secondly, because of his lowly origin of clay, there is always the possibility of man being caught in the meshes of customs, superstitions, selfish desires, and false teachings. It is this situation that may make him pugnacious, unclean, false, slavish, hankering after what is wrong or forbidden, and deflected from the love of his fellow-men and the pure worship of the One True God.

5. Thirdly is that this evil touches those who yield to it, and has no power over Allah's sincere servants, purified by His Grace. This means that sincerity towards submitting oneself to Allah's will is the best shield against Satan who is out to destroy man.

6. It is for this reason that men's behaviour keep fluctuating between good and bad. They turn to God when they are in distress or in suffering. However, when they are in affluence or prosperity they forget God and His bounty. Indeed they should be grateful when in affluence or prosperity and remain steadfast and patient when they are in adversity. In order to ensure that man is consistently inclined to right and virtue, he needs to be endowed with a true understanding of himself, his Creator and his environment. Such knowledge can only be obtained through the continuous guidance of religion. As such religion provides man with the right frame of mind, encourages him to do good and avoid evil. Religion is the anchor that prevents man from drifting aimlessly and being caught in the meshes of evil.

7. In the real world, we have on one extreme a society that completely rejects all religions and Godliness. After about seventy years of practising life without any religion, the communists in Eastern Europe and Russia have failed miserably and disintegrated. Clearly, there is no spiritual anchor in such a society and their failure in achieving their purely materialistic objectives must in some way be due to this spiritual emptiness. The failure is total and complete so much so that a great power is now forced to literally beg for help from its former enemies. In Albania where Enver Hoxha, the former President, outlawed religion and destroyed bibles and Qur'ans and all literature pertaining to religion, there is now only a shell of a country.

8. A great people with a proud civilisation is reduced to being the poorest nation in Europe. But a Government cannot destroy faith by legislation, or even by force. Today the Albanians have returned to their religions, to Islam, to Christianity and to Orthodox Christian beliefs. Peace and calmness have now returned and there is a new sense of purpose and confidence in the future.

9. Man does not live by bread alone. The spiritual hunger must be assuaged also. Otherwise even though the stomach is full, there will still be an emptiness, a void that renders life meaningless. To live in order to eat is to be no different from animals. Surely man is created for a greater purpose. The world is what it is today because of man. A creed that ignores the difference between man and animals, an ideology that is based exclusively on the gratification of the senses, and nothing more, is decivilising and denies the greatness of the mind and the superior feelings that man is endowed with. To reduce mankind to merely existing without purpose is to deny reason and the rationality of creation.

10. We have, on the other hand, the predominantly Christian Western societies which separate religious life from the secular. Hedonism, the love of pleasure and the gratification of the senses, has gradually displaced religion and made it more and more irrelevant. With this the structure of society has changed.

11. The relation between members of western society is now largely based on material gains and sensual gratification. Selfishness dominates in the search for these objectives. The community has given way to the individual and his desires. Inevitably the result is the breakdown of established institutions. Marriages, family, respect for elders, for conventions, for customs and traditions have all but disappeared. In their place emerged new values based largely on rejection of all that relates to faith. And so there are single parent families which breed future incests, homosexuality, co-habitation, unlimited and unrestrained materialism and avarice, irreverence, disrespect for all and sundry and of course rejection of religion and religious values. Society and its members have nothing to hold on to. They are adrift and directionless. Even their hedonism, the pleasure-seeking lifestyle begins to pall and bore them, leaving them totally empty or seeking thrills from drugs and other vices.

12. The west has not yet gone the way of the Communist, but the decay has begun. We cannot foretell the future but there is a good chance that, unless sanity and a return to religion takes place, what has befallen the Communist will also befall them.

13. The Muslim community suffers from a different malady. Weak and oppressed, suffering all kinds of psychological ailments, many seek solace and escape in esoteric religious practices. In so doing they interpret Islam in ways which are unIslamic. Because of this, Islam and the Muslim have acquired a bad name. It is regarded as a millstone around the neck of the

followers, retarding their development. It has become associated with unprincipled practices such as terrorism and injustices to their co-religionists and the followers of other religions. It has split them into warring factions, causing untold misery and carnage among them. And it has brought this noble humanising religion to disrepute. The Muslims are no longer in control of their destiny. They are being manipulated and made the tools and proxies for the conflicts of others. And they suffer this willingly, blaming others and blaming fate.

14. Muslim extremists pride themselves in their adherence to Islam. But in fact they are the bane of Islam. It is they who give Islam a bad image, who prevent the world from understanding the true teachings of Islam, who repel would-be followers and indeed it is they who exasperate and drive other Muslims to forsake the faith and succumb to the blandishments of materialism and ungodly ideologies.

15. The only redeeming feature with the Muslims is that whether they are practising Muslims or not, they still consider themselves Muslims, i.e. they generally believe they have a faith. 16. From the different models of society across the globe, we can hardly find a society worthy of emulating. We have on the one extreme the communists who have completely rejected all religions and have eventually destroyed themselves. On the other end of the continuum, we have from time to time the emergence of some extreme religious groups who devote their whole life and self to the pursuit of their beliefs to the exclusion of all else. In trying to effect their escape from a world beset with problems, they themselves become a problem to the world.

17. In between these two extremes we have three major categories of societies in relation to religion. First, we have the predominantly Christian Western societies which confine religion to only their private and personal life. Religion has no place in their economic, political or social pursuits. They claim their state to be secular and that "God is dead". Whilst they may have achieved tremendous progress in their economic pursuits, they have failed miserably in upholding truth, justice and other virtues. Their societies are suffering from moral decadence. Their social lives are filled with all kinds of psychological and physical problems. They are living in stress and fear of new fatal diseases which their way of life has engendered and now threaten to spread wildly as they refuse to give up their hedonistic lifestyles.

18. Secondly, of course we have the East Asian models which have also demonstrated tremendous success in economic pursuits whilst at the same time keeping quite strictly to their own

values, traditions and religions. Although they do not adhere strictly to their religious teachings, they do not reject or secularise their religions. They adopt a very flexible approach.

19. Finally, we have the Muslim societies who have a firm belief in Islam but have now become confused by the emergence of numerous sects and creeds, some of which plainly deviate from the true teachings. Their weakness and worldly failures do not provide humanity with a good model to follow.

20. History has invariably taught us that the rise and fall of civilisations has been chiefly due to the citizenry. It is the people that make up civilisations. It is the quality of the citizens that is the most important ingredient to effect dramatic changes to society and nations. Islam, for example nurtured its earliest community based on truth and justice such that within a short span of time it had spread its influence throughout Arabia, Central Asia, North Africa and even Southern Europe. It was also Islamic civilisation that had tremendously contributed to the various fields of knowledge to the world. This was merely because of the deliberate and concerted efforts undertaken by the early Muslims to integrate both the physical and spiritual aspects of life in all spheres. As a complete way of life, the separation of Church and State and the secularisation process which had deeply affected Christianity in the Middle Ages, was never a problem to Islam and the Muslims. However fear of a loss of influence by the Ulama following upon the Christian separation of Church and State, led to the confinement of knowledge purely to religious rites, laws and duties. With that began the decline of Islamic progressive civilisation, and the break-up and subjugation of the Muslim World.

21. From even this cursory review of the realities that have taken place in different societies, we should find that religion has a very pertinent role to play. Religion should never be regarded as simply the rituals which affect people only at the individual level. Religion which seeks truth to establish justice in all aspects of societal life should be regarded as beneficial to society. It is religion which acts as the anchor or underlying principles that govern not only the physical and material well-being but also the spiritual growth and upliftment of man. It is religion that steers people towards a more balanced life. It is also religion that provides true guidance and the strongest motivation towards achieving a more fruitful and meaningful life.

22. The issue at hand is to find out the ways and means of how a nation can produce a people or society that has as its core the deep sense of religious consciousness, committed to the

highest standards of ethical and moral values and yet is most progressive, industrious, dynamic and dedicated towards advancement and progress. This is indeed very necessary and pertinent because we can easily achieve material progress by physical planning and development. But, the stark truth is that all the material wealth that we have accumulated can be completely wiped out if we do not have the morally right set of values among the people who manage them. We have repeatedly seen this happening at the individual and family levels; we have also read in history about the fall of empires for invariably the same reason. And we are seeing today the destruction of many civilisations.

23. Secondly, we have to be conscious of the need for a balanced and integrated development in the sense that planning and development should incorporate the need for spiritual upliftment right from the start and not to leave such ingredient at the end. We have so far completely ignored this aspect of development especially during the initial planning stage. If we include them it is only as an afterthought.

24. Thirdly, it is essential to realise that in the past we have concentrated almost entirely on physical development. Of late, we have been incorporating some aspects of human development in the form mainly of non-spiritual human resource development. What is most pertinent is that there is a great difference between human resource development and human development. The former involves matching of the demand for different categories and skill levels of manpower with the supply so that we do not face acute mismatch in terms of numbers as well as categories and skills. Human development entails the kinds of education, training, environment, and the like, that are necessary to develop all the potentials of the human individual in both body and soul, that is, his dual nature. This aspect of development has not been given sufficient attention. It is no surprise, therefore, that we are faced with numerous human problems. As the Holy Qur'an puts it: "Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of (the meed) that the hands of men have earned. That (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil). " Al-Rum (30): 41.

25. From the above verse of the Holy Qur'an, we should realise that we are completely responsible for all the mischief that have appeared on this earth as well as on the whole environment. This mischief is the result of our own proclivity for evil. After all, the result of evil cannot be other than evil. But Allah will restore the balance in the end by purging and purifying those that break His Harmony and Law. We are witnessing some of these today.

26. This meeting of the Muslim and Christian minds should serve to correct not only the distorted view each has of the other but to bring back religion to its proper perspective in the scheme of things.

27. I wish all participants successful deliberations.