

## **THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE WORLD ISLAMIC CIVILISATION FESTIVAL**

THE ISLAMIC CENTRE, KUALA LUMPUR, 17 JUNE 1994

I wish to thank the organising committee for giving me the opportunity to be here today and to officially open the World Islamic Civilisation Festival 1994, which is the first of its kind to be held in this country and probably the region also.

2. A festival of this nature should help to enlighten Muslims and non-Muslims alike regarding the achievements of the Muslims in the past. But that is not the main reason for this festival. The more important objective is to show to Muslims today that if they are prepared to acquire the relevant knowledge and use it for the benefit of the Ummah it is not impossible to revive the glory and the achievements of the Islamic civilisation.

3. After the death of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, Islam spread widely outside the Arab world, and finally covered about three-quarters of the known surface of the earth then. Though military strength and sophistication played a role, the lasting contribution of the Muslims was in the fields of mathematics, science, medicine, astronomy and other areas of human knowledge. This was possible because in the early period of Islam, the quest for knowledge was not restricted by narrow interpretations of the religion. In other words, the early Muslims followed closely the examples of the Prophet in leadership, in acquisition of wealth and knowledge while not neglecting the performances of the compulsory ibadah. It was when knowledge and skills for the advancement of the Muslims were neglected that decline set in for the great civilisation the Muslims had built. Attempts were repeatedly made to revive the glory of Islamic civilisation after the decline but they all failed because those who fear that worldly progress would result in neglect of religion insisted and persisted in dividing knowledge into the religious and the secular and regarding or condemning the so-called secular knowledge as inimical to Islam. Coincidentally, it was about this time that in the Christian world the church was separated from the state, with the consequent loss of power by the church. It was felt that secular knowledge could reduce the influence of religious leaders on the state and on society. This may be denied but we know of many instances where professionally-trained people are persuaded to give up their professions in favour of what is regarded as a religious calling.

4. Clearly if we want to regain the glorious age of Islam, we have a great need to learn the history of the founding and the spread of Islam. History is the greatest teacher.

Unfortunately because of the downgrading of knowledge that is regarded as non-religious, Muslim historians concentrated almost exclusively on the contribution of the spiritual to the successes of the Muslims. On the other hand, Western historians tend to be biased. We are thus left with the artifacts and relics of the Islamic civilisation in order to learn and to assess the other causes for the early successes of the Muslims. Still there is much to be gleaned from these which can help us to reconstruct the past and teach us about how the greatness of Muslim civilisation was achieved and how we can go about trying to revive it.

5. But first there is a great need to debunk some of the beliefs which had contributed towards the decline. Principal among these is the teaching that the world is not meant for the believers. It is meant for the non-believers to enjoy. While some things which the non-believers enjoy are things which Muslims should not hanker after, is it true that we should also not benefit from the abundant bounty that Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala has bestowed upon this planet? The world is not a gift of Allah to the non-believers but it is a gift to the believers. Not to appreciate and not to use this gift seems to be particularly ungrateful and Allah does not like those who are not grateful, not just for His blessings but for anything good that is done to us, even by mere man.

6. In no other religion is there so much stress on observing our surroundings; the fields, the mountains and the seas and the bounty they hold for man; the animals and the plants and how they contribute to life; the rain and the sunshine and how they bring to life that which we would have assumed to be dead.

7. Does observation mean that we should only make a casual glance and then mechanically praise Allah? Is it not true that the more we observe, the deeper we study the creations of Allah the more we would be amazed and beholden to His greatness? For while our studies into the minutest structure of matter, the atoms and beyond can contribute to our understanding of how all matters are formed and structured, we can never discover why they are so structured; why they function as they do; why they react with each other and form substances which are ever more complex; and most puzzling of all, why they contribute to life on earth. We can explain at length as to how all these happen: but we can never understand or explain why they happen: why one atom of oxygen combining with two atoms of hydrogen, two invisible gases, would form the ordinary water that is so tangible and so essential to life? Why not atoms of other gases? Why water? Why is water a source of life and its sustenance? We, through the most thorough observation, i.e. study, can understand and unravel

how all these matter and compounds and actions and reaction take place, but we can never answer the question why they are so or they do so. The only conclusion we can make is that it must be a power beyond human understanding, it must be God, it must be Allah.

8. Surely our studies would make us appreciate and believe in Allah even more strongly. Surely the deeper and the more extensive the knowledge, the greater would be the faith for what we discover through our studies to be even greater miracles than we thought after a casual glance; miracles which only Allah can create.

9. Yet Muslims are afraid to study all the mysteries around them, to discover the wonders of Allah's creation, and to utilise them even as we utilise plants and animals for food and all the other creations of Allah to sustain and enhance the quality of our life. Because we do not study in depth, Muslims today have to rely on the results and the discoveries of those of other faiths. Today many of us are totally dependent on the results of the non-Muslims' application of their knowledge for our food, transport, defence, clothing and the roof over our heads. Indeed, even in the performance of our religious duties we depend on the non-Muslims. If this life, this bounty on earth is not for us, then why do we share the discoveries and inventions of the non-believers who study the creation of Allah, and use their knowledge to better their life on earth?

10. Yet we know that during the glorious centuries of Islamic civilisation, it was the Muslims who led, who discovered the bounties of Allah through their learning, and made them available to the non-Muslims then. And the Muslims led because they were very advanced in all fields of learning, in the sciences, in medicine, in mathematics, biology, astronomy and in a whole lot of other disciplines.

11. Unless and until we stop dividing knowledge into the religious and the secular, unless we regard all knowledge as faith enhancing and therefore not only permissible but vital to the Muslims and their faith, we are never ever going to rebuild Islamic civilisation. Worst still, we are going to remain in the modern equivalent of the Dark Ages.

12. And so the first step towards an Islamic renaissance is to debunk the belief that the world is not for us, that knowledge, other than spiritual knowledge, is secular and must be proscribed. Instead, such knowledge should be sought for they can truly strengthen faith and revive the greatness of the Islamic civilisation.

13. We know the great scholars of the golden period of Islamic civilisation were not just specialists in their fields but almost invariably they were learned in the teachings of Islam. They were thus able to relate their knowledge to their faith. Today Muslims either know the teachings of Islam exclusively or they are learned in other subjects, equally exclusively. They are therefore unable to relate the one with the other. As a result they either become spiritually fanatical and reject anything they do not know as being secular and proscribed, or having studied non-religious subjects they find themselves unable to defend their knowledge as it relates to their faith. When challenged by religious fanatics as to the relevance of their knowledge to Islam they are at a loss for an acceptable answer. They often feel guilty or alternatively they reject religion because of their inability to reconcile what they have learnt with the teachings of Islam. For as long as this dichotomy remains, there will always be a dearth of scholars, of subjects, which are not specific to the faith among Muslims, thus condemning the Muslims to backwardness and preventing the achievement of a glorious Islamic civilisation.

14. But when we talk of recreating the Islamic civilisation we do not mean to build a fair copy of the Muslims' world from the 7th century until the decline of the Turkish Sultanate. Even when we are enjoined to seek guidance from the Sunnah of the Prophet we are not expected to reproduce exactly the achievements and the life of the Prophet. Indeed the golden period of Islamic civilisation was not brought about by the reproduction of the life and times of the Prophet in Makkah and Madinah. The Islamic civilisation was the result of following the true teachings of Islam which the people in the lifetime of the Prophet were not able to benefit from fully because of time. In size and in the span of knowledge and achievements, the Islamic civilisation that was built after the demise of the Prophet was far greater than the Muslim world in the Prophet's time. This is because the application of Islamic teachings and creed over the centuries was able to bring about the maximum results.

15. Similarly, the building of the modern Islamic civilisation should be in the context of the achievements of humanity at the present time. It should reflect contemporary life and thoughts which are relevant to modern times but still compatible with the teachings of Islam. If we believe that Islam is for all ages, then we will be contradicting this belief, if we consider Islamic civilisation possible only in conditions prevailing in the 7th century of the Christian era in Madinah.

16. But even if we have disabused ourselves of the restrictive compartmentalisation of knowledge into the religious and the

secular, and if because of that we have the knowledge compatible with modern civilisation, there are still many conditions to be met before a great civilisation can be achieved. Chief among these is the establishment of a workable system of administration and Government compatible with both Islam and the needs of modern times. Again it must be remembered that the forms of governments in the Muslim empires were not identical with the Madinah or the Makkah Governments of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Many different forms of governments were practised without in any way making these un-Islamic. It is not the form of Government that matters. It is whether they are compatible with Islam or not.

17. It is sad that anarchy or at least bad Government prevails today in most Muslim countries. We are quite unstable. Unseemly struggles for power take place everywhere, resulting in millions being killed or forced to migrate, properties being destroyed, anarchy prevailing, food being so short that death from starvation becomes almost a regular feature of some Muslim countries. Still the fighting and the conflicts go on simply because one person or one group wants to grab power. It is to our utter shame that the faithful have to appeal to the non-believers to help bring about peace or to feed the starving.

18. Are we incapable of administering our own people? Are we incapable of using modern concepts of Government, of administering justice, of dealing with an ever more sophisticated society with its complex social and economic imperatives? If we look around, it would seem so. For so many Muslim countries are unstable, insecure and unable to develop. Yet the modern systems of Government are more in keeping with the sunnah of the Prophet than the authoritarian governments which existed during the past Islamic civilisation.

19. Of course we need not accept systems developed by non-Muslims wholesale. Like everything else there are good and bad points. And the bad points can be as damaging as any. We see anarchy and moral collapse in the Western democratic system which has brought about their decline. But we can avoid them and practise only those that are not against our own beliefs and values. But we cannot recreate the society as it existed in the Prophet's time or even those which prospered during the golden age of Islamic civilisation as a prerequisite for the revival of the golden age.

20. The civilisation that we build must not be for the purpose of confronting other societies or civilisations. It should contribute towards the sum total of human progress. It should show the compatibility and balance between the spiritual and the material, between progress and moral values, between

religion and worldly concerns. It should provide the alternative to a world that has so obviously lost its direction. It should be a viable and an acceptable alternative, based on reasoned arguments rather than blind faith in certain tendentious interpretations of Islam.

21. Islam can still show the way. There can be a modern Islamic civilisation which is not an attempt to reconstruct life in the Arabian Peninsular in the 7th century nor a slavish copy of a decadent Western system. There can be a modern Islamic civilisation which can provide both the spiritual and material answers to modern man's needs. If we say that these are but dreams, that they are worldly and irrelevant, that the only way is to recreate the life in the 7th century, then we should accept that Muslims will forever be oppressed and impoverished. In that state we can be separated from our faith. If therefore the faithful decrease in number and in some places are wiped out completely, then we must only blame ourselves. It is we who have sinned, for we insist on doing what is obviously wrong because we dare not question the correctness or otherwise of the popular contemporary interpretation of our faith.

22. Perhaps it is too much to expect that our Islamic Civilisation Festival would awaken us all from the stupor that we are in. But we would be failing in our duty to our religion if we do not try to seize the opportunity to learn from the lessons that the history of Islamic Civilisation holds for us. There is more to this exhibition than to bask in the glow of a great past. Those who harp on the greatness of the past are in fact admitting and accepting their present decline. This exhibition is not for reflected glory. It is a reminder and lesson on how a great faith can lead to greatness, to the establishment of one of the greatest, if not the greatest civilisation on earth.

23. What has been done once by man can be done again. It is for us to decide.

24. Insya-Allah, we will awaken and we will decide.

25. With this, I declare open the World Islamic Civilisation Festival 1994.