

## **The Seminar On "The Role Of Islamic Civilisation In Fostering Inter-Religious Understanding"**

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Firstly I would like to thank the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) for inviting me to deliver the keynote speech at this Seminar on "The Role of Islamic Civilisation in Fostering Inter- religious Understanding".

2. Today we are on the brink of a new millennium. It is a good time to reflect seriously on what has happened and what might happen. The former is of course, the easier of the two.

3. The last time the world ushered in a new millennium, Islamic civilisation was perhaps at its peak. But as we approach the third millennium of the Christian era, Islamic civilisation seems to be at its lowest ebb. The Muslims, although they have achieved political independence, are very much dominated by other people. Muslims are being massacred by the hundreds of thousands without their co-religionists being able to do anything to help. We should not be surprised therefore if it is difficult to believe that Islamic religion and Islamic civilisation had played a role in inter-religious understanding.

4. I say this because the present-day perception of Islam both by Muslims and by non-Muslims is quite different and very often at variance with the teachings of Islam as practised by the early Muslims, particularly during the period when Muslims were revelling in their glorious civilisation.

5. Today Muslims are seen to be aloof and isolated even when they live in communities which have large numbers of non-Muslims. They are seldom regarded as practising and contributing towards inter-religious understanding.

6. The non-Muslims are at least partly to blame because they often propagate ideas about Islam and Muslims which are negative. Among ethnic Europeans the memories of the Crusade and the conquest of European land by Muslims many centuries ago are kept alive. Every fault of the Muslims is enlarged and linked with the religion even though it may have nothing to do with Islam. It is not acknowledged that Muslims are ordinary people divided by race and culture and are as subjected to ordinary human weaknesses as anybody else. Instead they are regarded as a monolithic group. This perception leads to frequent generalisations so that the crimes or misbehaviour of a few are attributed to the culture and practices of all the Muslims.

7. Thus the stereotyping of the Muslims as undisciplined backward people, unsociable, fanatical fundamentalists who are given to terrorism. That terrorism is not a monopoly of the Muslims is ignored entirely. Every terrorist act is attributed to Muslims until proven otherwise.

8. In terms of terror and systematic oppression the ethnic Europeans have no match. Hitler's massacre of six million Jews ranks as the most heinous in the 20th Century. And now we are witnessing the mass-killings of the Albanians in

Kosovo, which was preceded by the massacre of hundreds of thousands of the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet all these acts by ethnic Europeans are never described as European terrorism or Christian terrorism.

9. Even Buddhists have thrown up a number of terrorists as witness the killings by the shadowy Japanese Buddhist cult. Hindus have massacred Muslims off and on in India.

10. But acts of terrorism or even simple self-defence by Muslims in Palestine are invariably described as Muslim terrorism. The terrorists, if they are terrorists and in many instances they are not, are labelled Muslim terrorists. Terrorism by others, by ethnic Europeans, by intolerant Christians and Jews, by Buddhists are never linked to their religions. There are no Christian terrorists, or Jewish terrorists or Buddhist terrorists or Orthodox Christian terrorists which the Serbs no doubt are.

11. That more Muslims have been terrorised by Christians and Jews has never been mentioned. Terrorism is made out to be a Muslim monopoly and others are just terrorists unconnected with their ethnic group or culture or religion.

12. There can be no doubt that today the most oppressed people in the world are the Muslims. Their independence and their rights as members of the human race have been ignored and violated over and over again. Their countries have been subjected to sanctions, to bombings, to all kinds of humiliation. Is it any wonder that Muslims seem to be perpetually resentful and antagonistic towards non-Muslims, to cut themselves off from the others and to reject the norms and the way of life that is common among the rest of the world? They seem to reject the religions of others and they do not seem to contribute to inter-religious understanding.

13. But the Muslims are equally to be blamed for their ugly reputation, their poor image and their isolation. However, this has not always been so. The early Muslims were outgoing people who tolerated and associated closely with people of other religions. Islamic teachings did not and does not proscribe such tolerance and association. Islam in fact enjoins upon the Muslim to accept that there are people of different faiths who worship in different ways. They are not asked to force these people to accept Islam. Obviously, they must tolerate and understand these non-believers, not regard them as enemies.

14. What is it that is part of the teachings of Islam which the early Muslims practised? As has been pointed out the Quran specifically mentioned that there would be people of other faiths who worship in other ways. Indeed, the Quran went further to advise the Muslims that they should not be critical or pass disparaging remarks about the practices of adherents of other religion for this may result in these people making similar remarks about Islam.

15. Forced conversion to Islam is not sanctioned by the Quran. Indeed, the Prophet (S.A.W.) was told not to be disheartened if non-Muslims did not convert, for if Allah so wishes, they would convert. If they didn't it was because Allah had

not yet willed it. And indeed many of the early enemies of Islam accepted the faith.

16. The Quran also pointed out that Allah has peopled this world with people of different races so they may know each other. And the Arabs were not superior to the others except when they prostrate before Allah and practise the teachings of Islam thoroughly and sincerely.

17. And so the early Muslims were not only tolerant of non-Muslims but in their search for knowledge as enjoined by Islam they were willing to study the sciences and the mathematical knowledge of the non-Muslims, in particular the Greeks. They translated Greek works into Arabic, studied them and developed them further. Soon their universities and their learned men lead the world and the European Christians were seeking knowledge at their feet.

18. Islamic civilisation in Spain reached its peak of glory when Muslims were tolerant of others and were prepared to learn from them. In Muslim Spain Christians, Jews and Muslims lived side by side. Many were the Jews and Christians who served in the courts of the Muslim rulers and in their Governments.

19. Then came the decline, earlier in Spain than in Eastern European. Muslim religious intellectuals and jurists began to reinterpret the teachings of Islam. They postulate that the Muslims had departed from the teachings of Islam when they seek other than religious knowledge and associated with non-Muslims. The learning of the sciences and mathematics pioneered by the Christians was regarded as worldly and not desired by Islam. Instead Muslims must lead a life dedicated entirely toward gaining merit for the life in the here- after. Much stress was laid on Islamic jurisprudence, on punishment for those who had allegedly deviated from the religion. The Spanish and Jewish people who had converted to the Islamic faith were regarded with suspicion and toleration towards them began to diminish.

20. As the Muslims turned away from all learning which were not exclusively about religion, their skills deteriorated. They became weak and were unable to match the sophistication of European sciences, weaponry and military prowess. Eventually they lost their Spanish Empire. They were expelled from Spain unless they converted to Christianity.

21. The same fate later befell the Turkish Empire. At the height of their glory they were assailed by doubts about the quality of their Islam. While the Europeans modernised and were discovering new ways of defending themselves against the redoubtable Turkish forces, the Turks were concerned over trivialities such as whether tight trousers and peak caps were Islamic or not. Whereas the earlier Turkish forces were well-equipped with the best weapons of their time, their knowledge and their industry did not keep up with the knowledge, industrial skills and manufacturing capabilities which were rapidly making the Europeans superior in all fields.

22. The Turkish religious leaders were only concerned about ensuring that their narrow interpretations of Islam were adhered to strictly by the state and the people. They were not concerned over the weakening of the Turkish state and its defence capability. Parts of the Empire peopled by non-Turks began to break away to establish independent states. The Europeans encouraged this and even aided the Arabs to fight for their independence from the Turks.

23. The Arabs expected to be independent but in the end they found that their European allies replaced the Turks as their masters. They all became colonies of the French and the British. In North Africa Muslim lands were conquered and occupied by the Spanish and the French while in Central Asia the Russian Communists imposed not only their rule but also their atheistic ideology on the Muslims.

24. By the time the Muslims realised that their days of glory were over, they had become an extremely backward and weak people. Initially they submitted meekly to foreign rule. They deluded themselves into believing that this worldly life is not for them and that heaven awaited them in the after-life. That the Quran clearly states that they should seek 'hassanah' or 'bounty' in this world was ignored by them. They expect to achieve merit for their after-life purely through the performance of religious rituals. They ignored the injunction to look after their community's well-being and interest in this world, and they refused to acquire knowledge except those related to what they interpreted as the teachings of Islam.

25. And so from being the most knowledgeable and advanced people the Muslims regressed in every field. Hegemonised and oppressed by the non-Muslims they developed extreme resentment and hatred of their detractors. They blamed their enemies entirely for their misfortunes. They hardly ever examined and questioned their own role in their downfall and subsequent oppression.

26. Actually their downfall was at least partly due to their narrow interpretation of their own religion after the initial flowering of their civilisation. Discarding the so-called worldly knowledge and quibbling about what constituted the true teachings of Islam, they neglected some of the most important injunctions of Islam. They neglected even the injunction to prepare for their defence by taking the word of the Quran too literally.

27. True the Quran enjoined upon the Muslim to strike fear among their enemies by readying their war steeds and their swords. If the Quran had mentioned steel tanks, rockets, aircraft, bombs and guns, the teachings of Islam would not have been credible, much less accepted by the ignorant Arab at the time of the Prophet. To ready horses and swords was more understandable in the days of the Prophet. But the real message of the Quran is to deter the enemy with a credible defence force. Had this message been understood then, the Muslims would not have forsaken the study of the sciences and other allegedly worldly learnings necessary for the invention and production of the ever changing weapons for defence.

28. The result is the defeat of the once mighty Muslim armies and the fall of all Muslim lands to the European. Having fallen they still failed to diagnose the cause of their downfall. They went on with their endless debate on Islam, Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic practices. This debate only led to their fragmentation as new sects, cults and teachings threw up frequently antagonistic groups. Even the achievement of national independence did not result in the realisation of the need to acquire the skills and knowledge to defend the country and the religion and to catch up with the progress of the developed countries. Instead everywhere there was a tussle between the religiously educated and those educated in other disciplines for control of the state apparatus. There can be no doubt that the desire for power was not motivated by religion as much as personal greed and ambition.

29. As most Muslims are religiously inclined, each side tried to outdo the other by professing to be guided by the teachings of Islam. Each tried to be more Islamic than the others. That what they were doing was against the true teachings of Islam did not deter those who saw in their profession of faith a means of getting popular support and power.

30. The rallying cry of the orthodox religiously trained group is ' secularism' . Anything at all that is not directly concerned with worship, rituals and the gaining of merit for oneself is classified as secular and therefore irreligious or anti-religion.

31. It is unfortunate that Mustafa Kamal, the Turkish patriot, had wrongly blamed Islam and not the narrow interpretation of Islam as the cause of the collapse of the Turkish Empire. Believing that the solution to Turkey' s problems lie in rejection of Islam, Mustafa Kamal made secularism the Turkish state creed. Islam was proscribed in his belief that to be secular the Islamic religion must in no way influence the affairs of state. Thus he expected the country he had saved from Greek occupation would be like the European countries where there was a separation between the Church and the State. He attributed the progress and success of the Europeans to this separation and the secularisation of the Governments.

32. Mustafa Kamal' s secularisation of Turkey angered the Muslims in Turkey and the Muslim world in general. They attributed it to associating and accepting European (Christian) values. They accordingly developed a fear of whatever was regarded by them as secular. In their anger and fear they did not pause to think about what was meant by secularism. They certainly did not examine it in the context of Islam.

33. Separation of Church and State, separation between the secular and the religion may be possible in Christianity. But it is impossible in Islam. Islam is a way of life and a way of life cannot be confined to pure worship and rituals only. It cannot be about the here-after entirely. A way of life must involve everything that we do in our daily life.

34. Thus the study of science and technology is related to the provision of a

good life for the Muslims and certainly is concerned with the safety and defence of the Muslim ummah. Doing business and acquiring wealth is also for the well-being of the ummah in this world for how else can the alms, and the zakat be expected to help the needy. Even improving the means of travel is related to the performance of the Haj. Today millions of Muslims are able to perform the Haj because of the new modes of transportation developed by non-Muslims. The Muslims cannot claim they made this contribution to the performance of the Haj.

35. The development and the prosperity of the Muslim country, good Government, a good and just legal system, rules and regulation and laws, indeed everything that has to do in this world is a part of the way of life. The only thing that is required is that they do not go against the injunctions of Islam, that they do not lead to such arrogance that it denies that God exists. The Communists for example are so taken up by human skills and power that they reject God and religion.

36. The way of life of the Muslim does not include being ignorant, being without modern knowledge, being without skills, being poor and being forced to buy from others including from those whom they regard as being secular, for sustenance and for defence. Surely the present inability of Muslims to protect other Muslims who are being butchered and expelled from their countries is not in keeping with the Muslim way of life. And yet the inability of the Muslim to protect other Muslims in distress is entirely due to their backwardness and their general poverty.

37. There is nothing secular about learning the sciences, the skills and the technologies that can undoubtedly contribute towards the well-being and the safety of the Muslims. Merit for the here-after does not come from the performance of various rituals and worship and the study of religious matters alone. The whole community of Muslims will be committing a sin if none of them is able to perform ' fardu kifayah' i.e. to provide for the needs of the Muslims' well-being in this world.

38. The lack of understanding of secularism within the Muslim context, the fear of a repeat of the Turkish ' secularisation' has resulted in the Muslim becoming ignorant and backward and incapable of defending themselves. The blame must be put squarely on the Muslims for their inability to perform an essential part of the teachings of Islam.

39. But the fear of secularisation has lead Muslims into trying to insulate themselves from outside influence. To do this they try to physically isolate themselves from the non-Muslims. This they do by propagating the fear that contact with non-Muslims will lead to contamination of their religion and what they regard as their Islamic way of life. As a result they do not contribute towards inter-religious understanding as was done by the early Muslims.

40. In Malaysia today, there is a disturbing trend among religious teachers to influence children into avoiding contact with non-Muslims. Because Muslims should only eat what is halal, the teachers try to create fear among the children

that they may be eating food that is not halal. They create such doubts in the minds of the children that they do not trust even the food prepared in their own homes and in restaurants where their parents take them to.

41. This lead to a fear that association with non- Muslims would cause them to be contaminated with what is ' haram' to Islam. In a country where there is a substantial number of non-Muslims, the Muslim children are being taught to keep away from the non-Muslims, to be unsociable. They cannot therefore contribute towards inter-religious understanding.

42. This attempt to isolate the Muslims from the non- Muslims is not limited to kindergartens. Today in schools and universities Muslim students are urged to keep to themselves, to avoid activities which cannot be confined to Muslim students only. As a result it is rare for Muslim students to have non-Muslim friends, something that can contribute to inter-religious understanding.

43. The old generation was gregarious. They mixed well with non-Muslims and they were able to interact with them without in any way becoming any less Muslim. But we see the new generation already quite unable to adjust to a multiracial and multireligious country.

44. This insulation and isolation will not help foster interreligious understanding. Indeed in multiracial, multireligious Malaysia these Muslims are not going to be able to adjust and live harmoniously and to benefit from the numerous and varied opportunities such an environment offers for the prosperity and advancement of the Muslims. And what is happening in Malaysia, in terms of isolating and insulating the Muslims ostensibly in order to preserve the purity of their religion, is happening all over the Muslim world. If today the Muslims are misunderstood and are unable to create understanding of themselves and their religion, it is because they chose to create this misunderstanding by keeping themselves apart and so are unable to show the true teachings of Islam.

45. But isolating and insulating themselves is not all that the Muslims do to cause the non-Muslims to have a biased and unfriendly view of them. The oppression of the Muslims in many parts of the world, in Palestine, Eastern Europe and elsewhere has caused deep bitterness and anger among them. Unable to fight back because their countries are weak, many have resorted to violence, to acts which are described as terroristic, in order to vent their anger and frustration.

46. They very quickly learnt the methods of terrorism invented in the West. They hijack airplanes, they bomb buildings, they kill people, innocent and otherwise, and they indulge in other violent activities in order to further their cause.

47. Unfortunately, their cause is not served but they do bring about greater condemnation and misunderstanding of their religion and the Muslim people.

48. Today, as has been pointed out earlier, Islam and the Muslim have been made almost synonymous with terrorism. The whole world has this perception of Islam and the Muslims. It is as if Islam itself advocates irresponsible terroristic

acts.

49. Between their use of their religion to isolate themselves and their violent reaction to oppression, the Muslims have contributed much to the lack of understanding between them and the followers of other religions. But does Islam in fact teach the Muslim to isolate themselves, to create misunderstanding between them and the others?

50. Actually Islam does not teach this or advocate the isolation and the insulation of the religion. From the very beginning the Prophet and the Muslims were made to understand that Allah S.W.T. created the peoples of this world of different races and kinds so that they may know each other. These people and even the Arabs may not all accept Islam. The Quran clearly states that there will be those who will worship in their own way and their religion would be theirs. Their refusal to accept Islam must be accepted. The Prophet (S.A.W.) must accept this because his duty was to spread the message. If Allah so wishes then everyone would embrace Islam. If they don't it is Allah's wish and the Prophet need not despair.

51. In other words Muslims must accept that there will be people of many races and creeds who profess different religions and that they are so created that they may know each other, i.e. that there should be understanding between peoples of different religion.

52. And so the first Muslim community in Madinah was able to live among the Hebrews and the Christians. No attempt was made to force the others to become Muslims. If later on the Jews were expelled from Madinah it was because they abetted and sided with the enemies who attacked Madinah and the Muslims. It was not because of religious differences.

53. The early Muslims conquered many lands where the people were of other religions and these people retained their faiths to this day. In Muslim Spain, Jews and Christians were able to practise their religions and way of life, and even participate in the administration of the country. It is significant that following the reconquest of Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella, non Catholics disappeared. Jews and Muslims either accepted Catholicism or migrated to Muslim North Africa.

54. In Eastern Europe the Christians were happy to accept Turkish Muslim rule because of the very heavy taxes imposed by their former Christian rulers. These Christians remained as Christians although a few chose to embrace Islam.

55. It is a testimony to Muslim tolerance and understanding that in practically all countries ruled by Muslims there was and there still is a significant non-Muslim minority. By contrast the European countries had in the past only an insignificant number of Jews and almost no Muslim or people of other religions. Whereas the Jews thrived and even prospered in Muslim countries, they were subjected to periodical pogroms in Europe. This culminated in the Holocaust when some six million Jews were exterminated.

56. The early Muslims adhered closely to the teachings of Islam which recognise the rights of the ' Dhimmi' , the non-Muslims who had no quarrel with the Muslims. Right through the period of Islamic glory the non- Muslims were not only tolerated but played important roles in the Muslim countries.

57. This tolerance and cooperation with non-Muslims began with the Madinah Charter enacted by the Prophet (S.A.W) which encouraged solidarity among Muslims, Jews and Christians of the City of Madinah. Succeeding Caliphs all showed tolerance and understanding of the non-Muslims and their religions. After the surrender of Jerusalem the Caliph Omar in the treaty of surrender assured Sophronius, the Patriarch of the City that "The Caliph Omar Guarantees (the Christian) the safety of their persons, their goods, their churches and crosses, whether in good state or otherwise and in general their religion. Their church will not be turned into dwellings or destroyed ..... etc". And the Caliph honoured his treaty undertakings. Even on his death- bed Omar reminded the Muslims to show kindness to their non-Muslim neighbours.

58. The same terms and conditions were granted by Muslim leaders to the inhabitants of Damascus, al- Hijrah and others. Count Leon Ostrorog, a Western scholar wrote, "The Muslim thinkers of the Ninth Century have expanded a doctrine of toleration of non- Muslims".

59. The culture of tolerance of other religions and faiths developed by the Islamic civilisation was totally in keeping with the teachings of Islam. This tolerance was not passive. In medicine Jewish and Christian doctors worked closely with Muslim doctors and produced medical research works together. Even comparative religion was studied together by the scholars of the three monotheistic religions.

60. In administration the Muslim rulers of the Umayyad, Amirid and Taifa periods employed Jews in diplomacy, finance and public administration. Hasday ibn Shaprut was a Jewish physician in the Caliphs court and he openly looked after the interest of Jews in Muslim Spain. This practice of employing Jews in positions of importance was found also in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and even the Mamluk periods.

61. Further East, the Muslims came into contact with polytheistic religions. Although there was practically no reference to these religions and their adherents in the Quran, the Muslims found little difficulty in according to them the same treatment that they gave the monotheists. Thus Hindus and Buddhists were able to thrive in land conquered and ruled by the Muslims. That this is so is seen from the existence of Buddhists and Hindus in lands still ruled or formerly ruled by Muslims.

62. When the Sultan of Malacca embraced Islam he did cause to be destroyed all the Hindu temples where his people used to worship. But there is no evidence that he forced the foreign Hindus and Buddhists in his country to convert to Islam or to destroy their places of worship. And so to this day these people, although

they had adopted the Malay language and culture, retained their religious beliefs.

63. This tolerance and understanding of other religions, as has been pointed out, is a part of the teaching of Islam. Throughout history this teaching was accepted and practised. Of course like other teachings, there were, in practice, frequent deviations and distortions. Those with their own agenda may twist the interpretations in order to serve their purpose. And so throughout history and also presently there would be incidences of inter-religious misunderstanding between the Muslims and others. But these merely serve to prove the rule.

64. The Islamic civilisation has indeed contributed much towards inter-religious understanding. This is borne out by the fact that whereas in Muslim countries there are almost always thriving and prosperous non-Muslim communities, in most non-Muslim countries only one religion is found and practised. It is only lately that mosques and temples are found in Europe and America for example. It is also significant that there are hardly any Europeans who are Muslims, or Buddhists or Hindus.

65. This is not an attempt to make comparisons or to say that non-Muslims and the Civilisations that they built contribute less towards inter-religious understanding. It is merely to emphasise that Islam and the Muslims believe more in religious tolerance and understanding than they are made out to be.

66. It has been pointed out that the Muslim of today seem to be isolating themselves and to resort to violence, but they are a minority. Despite the decline of the Muslim civilisation, the majority of Muslims throughout the world today still tolerate and show understanding of other religions and their adherents. Thus in Bosnia, despite the massacre of Muslims by the Serbs, the Muslims never wavered from their objective of building a multi-religious nation in which the Serbs have an active share in the Government. The same is true of Lebanon. With few exceptions, in Muslim majority countries throughout the world, non-Muslims are free to practise their own religions. And in Malaysia the Muslim Malays who make up the majority have deliberately opted to form multi-racial and multi-religious Governments which work assiduously for inter-religious tolerance and understanding.

67. Islam and the Islamic Civilisation have indeed contributed much towards inter-religious understanding. This is the direct result of the teachings of Islam. It is perhaps difficult to acknowledge this but it is nevertheless true. If there are Muslims who seem not to be contributing towards inter-religious understanding today it is not because of the Islamic civilisation or the Islamic religion. It is because circumstances have given rise to many misinterpretation and deviations from the true teachings of Islam and because Islamic civilisation has declined somewhat.