

The Symposium On Islam At The United Nations University

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"Islam : Fostering Peace and Dialogue in an Interdependent World"

A few years back, in Oxford I spoke about Islam as the misunderstood religion. I pointed out that Islam is not only not understood by non-Muslims but even among Muslims there is a great deal of misunderstanding about its message and its teachings. And because both sides do not really understand this religion of 1.3 billion people, we now have a serious confrontation between non-Muslims and Muslims and also between Muslims and Muslims themselves.

2. Yet Islam is a religion that civilised the world. During the Dark Ages of Europe Islam was the light, the beacon which guided the world towards rationality, towards the aesthetics and the beauty of the arts, towards poetry and literature, towards mathematics, science and technology. There are enough evidence of all these for us to see.

3. When Muhammad the Prophet of Islam received his first message, the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsular were the most primitive people, divided into fierce warring tribes, who practised infanticide of female children and other frightening pseudo religious beliefs. The Prophet preached peace and brotherhood to these people, converted them to Islam and a way of life that respected the sanctity of life, tolerance for each other and relative respect for women.

4. When he migrated to Madinah his message was the same. He reconciled the tribes of Madinah, the Aus and the Khazraj, the Ansars, as they are known by Muslims, with the newcomers, the Muhajirin, from a different tribe from Mecca, and brought peace among them. He built a good community which included Jewish tribes and provided the city with the first written constitution.

5. The Muslims greeted each other and even the non-Muslims with the phrase "Peace be upon You." This is because among the desert people, there was seldom any peace. The yearning for peace has always been great among them. The Jewish "Shalom" expresses the same thing.

6. We know that in China the greeting is an enquiry, "Have you eaten?" The reason is obvious enough in a country which in the past was so frequently stricken with famine.

7. People yearn for the thing that means most to them. And for the early Muslims and also the present ones the yearning is for Peace.

8. Peace is therefore not only the name of Islam but also the message of Islam. Peace requires tolerance and through the ages the Muslims have been very tolerant. That is why historically the Jews would seek refuge from the pogroms, the Inquisition, the persecutions by the Europeans in Europe by migrating to Muslim countries. When Spain was reconquered by the Christians, the Jews preferred to migrate to North Africa with the Muslims rather than live under Christian kings. In Eastern Europe the Jews preferred Turkish-ruled regions than Christian countries.

9. We know for a fact that European Christians were very anti-Jew, confining them to ghettos and every now and again massacring them. The last pogrom was by Nazi Germans and six million Jews perished. It is in order to solve their Jewish problem that the Europeans supported the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. It is unfortunate that Palestine, a land owned and peopled by Arabs for centuries became the final choice. Initially Argentina and Uganda were proposed. The consequence today would probably be less violent.

10. What we are seeing today in Palestine is not a religious war, for prior to the establishment of Israel, the Arabs and the Jews lived at peace with each other in Arab Palestine, a part of the Ottoman Empire. The Palestinians are fighting today because the creation of Israel was by forcibly expropriating Arab land and property and expelling the Palestinians from their country and their homes. The hundreds of thousands of the Palestinian Arabs expelled from Palestine have now multiplied into millions and they still live in miserable refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon. They have lived under this oppressive conditions for more than fifty years. It is this that started the Israeli - Palestinian conflict. For fifty years now a territorial dispute has been misrepresented as a religious dispute. The Muslims are not anti-Jew. The Jews, together with the Christians, are the People of the Book, followers and worshippers of the same God that the Muslims worship. And in Muslim countries in the past and presently there is nothing equal to pogroms and inquisitions. Christians and Jews remain Christian and Jew in Muslim ruled countries. But if the Christians or Jews expropriate Muslim land and expel Muslims, then the Muslims, like everybody else will fight to regain their land.

11. Since Christians and Jews will not sympathise and support the Muslims in their struggle to regain their land, then they have to appeal to other Muslims. And Muslims will support

Muslims who have been deprived of their land because there is a common bond in their religion. Besides nobody else, certainly not the democratic humanitarians of Europe, will help them. The liberal democrats of Europe and America want the Jews to keep out. The Jews are too smart for the gentiles and can easily dominate them, despite not being numerous.

12. But Palestine is not the only cause celebre for the Muslims. Since the end of the First World War Muslims have been oppressed everywhere. The British and the French who promised independence for the Arabs if they helped the Europeans to break up the Turkish Ottoman Empire, reneged on their promises and made colonies of Arab lands liberated from the Turks. In Central Asia all the Muslim countries had been conquered by the Russians and Islam was actually outlawed. The Muslims were forced to become atheists. Indeed at one time only Saudi Arabia, where the two holiest Muslim places are located, was independent. The rest of the Muslim world was under harsh colonial rule. Only after World War Two were most of these countries liberated. But antagonism towards the Muslims and their countries continued. The Christian Crusade against Islam has never really ceased.

13. In many cases, in Iraq, Iran, Chechnya, Sudan, Libya, South Asia, Muslims were at one time or another oppressed. Sanctions have been applied against more Muslim countries than other countries. In Bosnia- Herzegovina and in Kosovar, Muslims were allowed to be massacred by the tens of thousands witnessed by millions on T.V., before the world put a stop to it. Yet in other countries intervention was immediate. Thus while Iraq, Iran and North Korea are labelled as the Axis of Evil, action is concentrated only on Iraq and Iran, Muslim countries. It is any wonder that Iran labelled its chief detractor as "the great Satan".

14. The Muslims fight back of course. Finding themselves incapable of conventional war or even conventional war of liberation they resort to any means including terror attacks. Muslims condemn these acts of terror as much as non-Muslims and most of them have shown a willingness to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. But their contribution does not free them of suspicion and threats of attack by the people with whom they collaborate.

15. The Muslim's claim that Islam is a religion of Peace may sound hollow in the light of the senseless terror attacks they have mounted. But the professed humanitarians of the West are not averse to starving men, women and children in order to force them to accept the "freedom" of democracy. And historically it is the great liberal humanitarian democrats who have killed millions through carpet bombing and the atom

bombs. And so the claims of the democrats that they believe in peace, freedom and justice is just as hollow. Either the end justifies the means or desperation and frustration justify the unjustifiable, for everyone.

16. We all should acknowledge that both the Muslim and non-Muslim detractors are at fault. That the Muslims have been oppressed and abused since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire cannot be denied. That Muslim land have been seized in order to make way for a Jewish state, to solve the European Jewish problem, is equally true. That the Muslims have been expelled from their homes and land, humiliated, bombed and killed with impunity are equally true. The net result is anger, bitterness and frustration among the Muslims. The net result, simply stated, is their terror attacks.

17. These attacks were brushed off as minor irritants by many who are supposed to oversee and police the world. When the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina for example were massacred, many of their detractors felt that it was nothing more than what they deserve. But then came the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York and part of the Pentagon, the symbols of the most powerful nation of the world. The Muslims and their senseless terror attacks cannot be ignored any more. Now the world is not safe from Muslim terror, and the rest of the world have become as angry as the Muslims, seeking to punish and avenge the deaths on September 11. Israel of course has seized the opportunity to terrorise the Palestinians even more.

18. Islam is a way of life. Islam prescribes the way that everything is done by its follower. In personal, family, communal, and "national" life, Muslims follow the guidance of Islam as prescribed in the Holy Quran and the traditions of the Prophet.

19. Of course not all Muslims do. Beside after the death of the Prophet, there have been and there still are so many different interpretations of the teachings of Islam that the single simple religion of the Prophet has now become many different religions, with adherents who are sometimes so fanatical about their particular interpretation and sects that they freely condemn other Muslims as apostates and are willing to fight and kill them. Indeed they are more ready to fight those Muslims whom they consider as apostates than they are to fight the non-Muslim enemies.

20. But Christianity too has undergone many changes and divisions. Right from the beginning they were divided between the Eastern Orthodox and the Christianity of the Holy Roman Empire part of Western Europe. Then the Western European

Christians were divided and divided again by the reforms of Martin Luther and later the Anglicans, the Calvinists, the Puritans and others. The Catholics produced the Jesuits, the Franciscans and many other orders. Now of course most European Christians are atheistic, more interested in their European heritage than the religious beliefs of Christianity.

21. The Jews on the other hand have never been interested in spreading their faith to non-Jews. They believe in being the Chosen People of God. And so no matter where they may be they are Jews, whether they practice Judaism or not. They invented Zionism as a Jewish creed, more national than religious. United they have been able to survive pogroms and inquisitions, finally to emerge as a powerful force when democracy gained for them equal status and their combined votes decide who governs the powerful countries where they reside.

22. It is impossible to discuss Islam without taking into consideration Christianity and Judaism. Outwardly there seems to be a religious confrontation between the three. But religion is secondary. What is important is territory.

23. The Europeans have always been acquisitive and covetous of what belongs to others. In their 2000 years of history their borders have shifted very many times as they war with each other to enlarge their territory. When they learnt to sail the oceans, they fought to acquire more foreign territory for themselves. In Europe itself they denied the Jews any land to call their own. Periodically they were forever thinking of a final solution to their Jewish problem. But they also needed the Jews to finance their wars and to enrich their countries.

24. The Holocaust failed to become the final solution. And so they supported the Zionist idea of a homeland for the Jews. Unfortunately their final choice was not anywhere in Europe but in Palestine, the land of the Arabs. It is so easy to take other people's land in order to pay your debt to others.

25. But it was a mistake. The Arabs cannot see any reason why they should be made to pay debts owed by Europeans. And since then the Palestinian territorial issue has plagued the world, has caused misunderstanding and bitter confrontation between Arabs, Europeans and Jews which most people attribute to differences of religions.

26. Fear of the Muslims has plagued the Europeans, ever since Islam began to spread in the 7th and 8th centuries. They had mounted Crusades against the Muslims through the centuries. Today it is safe to say that Europeans whether Christians of free thinkers still think of Islam as a threat. It is this

thinking, that has poisoned the relations between Europeans and Arabs, whether they are Muslims or not. Not only have Arab territories been seized but whenever there is an excuse they are oppressed.

27. There is obvious confusion between religious confrontations and territorial expropriation. There is of course some element of religion involved but the main issue is land expropriation and oppression when met with resistance. Today it is nothing more than a wish for retaliation and revenge.

28. The recent terror attack in Mombasa, Kenya, illustrates this attitude very well. The Israelis have vowed that they will hunt down the terrorists. No doubt they will. But it is most unlikely that Israelis are going to be safe after the killers are eliminated. The anger thus and those who support their cause, will ensure new recruits will stage new attacks. There will be no progress in the fight against the terrorists. Instead there will be escalation.

29. So how do we foster Peace and Dialogue in our Interdependent world in a world of anger and rage by everyone? The simple answer is that we will not be able to foster Peace and Dialogue for as long as both sides are set on seeking revenge. We can only foster Peace and Dialogue if we try to return to sanity and focus on the causes of terrorism instead.

30. I believe that at the root of Muslim terrorism is the fact that they are weak and incapable of negotiating on equal terms with their detractors. Imposing the will of the powerful on the Muslims is not dialogue for peace. Their Governments may be forced to agree, but not their people, some of whom will continue to fight in whatever way they can.

31. The second need is for the recognition of the true causes i.e. the expropriation of Muslim land and the oppression of Muslims all over the world. Since September 11 this oppression has become more widespread and more severe.

32. If these two factors are acknowledged and the negotiation is fairly conducted with the objective of removing the causes, God-willing peace will ensue. It will not be immediate as in the case of the conventional defeat of a country. Muslim Governments are not in complete control of the extremist elements in their countries. But without a cause, the anger would diminish and there would be less recruits for terrorism. Eventually terrorism would cease for lack of support.

33. The First World War was a war to end wars. But the peace treaties imposed on the defeated were so harsh that they

caused another war, World War II. After World War II the victorious Allies, realising that harsh treaties were counter productive, agreed to more reasonable treaties. The result is erstwhile enemies such as the French and the German are able to collaborate in the creation of the European Union. In the East Japan readily became the ally of the United States. For more than half a century now, world war has been avoided.

34. But the powers that be have not learnt how to handle the war against terrorism. They treat it like a conventional war. They are doing everything possible to increase terrorism. Countries which collaborate are being threatened. The only thing that can happen is a loss of cooperation in the fight against terror. And terror attacks are going to be a part of our lives, whoever we may be.

35. The world is set for a very long and painful war which will keep everyone in a state of fear, strangle world economy and render most of the advances in science and technology useless.

36. Let me once again say that Islam means peace. But there can be no peace, no dialogue unless the true grievances of the Muslims are acknowledged and attended to.

37. For two thousand years the Jews were massacred periodically to get rid of them. The Jews were very few in number. But the attempt has obviously failed. Today the Jews are more powerful than ever. The attempt to force the Muslim into submission will also fail. There are far too many of them and the human spirit in them will overcome all adversities. In the meantime while the attempt for a final solution of the Muslim problem is being implemented the world will live in a state of terror.

38. It is far better to go back to the table and to sincerely try to understand the problem, to negotiate and to work determinedly for peace.

39. In an Interdependent World we should all depend on each other. It is not an Interdependent World if everyone has to depend on just one party, or one power.