

## CONFERMENT OF THE HONORARY DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LETTERS

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY OF MALAYSIA, 15 JANUARY 2004

First of all, let me thank the International Islamic University Malaysia most sincerely for conferring on me the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters. It is an honour that I will cherish in the remaining years of my life and one which I particularly appreciate coming as it does from a university which was initiated in 1983 to help uplift Muslim societies out of backwardness and under development, not just in Malaysia but throughout the world. I must admit that the progress and success of the Islamic University of Malaysia is quite remarkable.

2. If we study the true teachings of the Quran regarding Islam's attitude towards the intellectual development of human beings, we cannot but be struck that the first message to Mohammed s.a.w. was "Iqra" "read" and reading must impart knowledge to the reader. Clearly, the first message to the Muslims is to seek knowledge. There is nothing in the Quran which enjoins that the reading and the knowledge must be exclusively confined to the knowledge of the religion of Islam. At that time the message of Islam had only just begun and the Quran had not been written yet. Accordingly the early Muslim scholars interpreted reading and the acquisition of knowledge widely and carried out a systematic translation of the works of the Greek, Persian and Indian scholars, analysed and studied them and added to the body of knowledge so accumulated. In Baghdad and Cordoba great libraries were set up where scientific and mathematic books and papers were kept, alongside books on religion.

3. The Great Islamic Civilisation was the result of the quest and acquisition of all kinds of knowledge, besides those relating to religion. At the time that the Muslim civilisation was flowering, the European Christians were wallowing in the ignorance and superstition of the Medieval Ages. Science was regarded as black magic and only a few of the clerics studied it. Many who propounded scientific theories were regarded as heretics and were even burnt at the stakes or excommunicated.

4. But towards the end of the 250 years dynasty started by the Ummayyad Abdul Rahman in Spain, centred in Cordoba, the Muslim attitude towards knowledge acquisition and intellectual development changed. The Almurabitun and Almohabidun movements from North Africa which gained control of Al-Andalus frowned upon the study of subjects other than Islamic religion. The study of Greek philosophy and the sciences were discouraged and finally banned altogether.

5. At about the same time, Al-Andalus began to break up into small states or taifas which warred against each other. Gradually, one by one, they fell to the forces of the Christian Kings of Spain. Obviously the loss of Islamic Spain was due to the disregard for the basic teachings of Islam. We have so far learnt nothing from the fall of Al-Andalus. Indeed the history of Islamic Spain is not given much attention when studying Islam. The average Muslim knows nothing about the 800 years of Muslim rule in Spain. Many are quite surprised when told of this fact.

6. During the glorious days of Islamic Spain, the Spanish Christians and the Jews spoke Arabic and were connoisseurs of Arabic literature and poetry. Alvarus, a Spanish bishop, deplored the lack of understanding of Latin among Spanish Christians. Some in fact converted to Islam but they were not quite accepted by the Arab Muslims. In fact the

Arab Muslims did not even regard the Berbers, Muslim though they were, as their equals. It is a common failing of many Arabs to this day.

7. Seeing the high achievements of the Arabs in Spain and elsewhere the Christian Europeans of France in particular, decided to gain access to the store of knowledge in the great libraries of Al-Andalus particularly in Cordoba and Toledo. Great efforts were made to translate the Arabic texts into Latin. Even the Quran was translated.

8. The ascendancy of the Almurabitun and the Almohabidun their rejection of non religious learning marks a turning point in the history of both the Muslims and the Europeans. For the Muslims it was the beginning of the decline of the Al-Andalus civilisation. In 1492, the year Columbus sailed across the Atlantic to discover for the Europeans a new land to acquire, the last taifa, Grenada, ruled by the Nasrids, fell to Ferdinand and Isabella. After 800 years Muslim Spain reverted back to Christian Spain. Although promised that they could go on staying in Spain and practice their religion, the Muslims soon found that they were not welcome. They had the choice of converting to Christianity or expulsion to North Africa or death. Incidentally the Jews who had prospered under Muslim rule, suffered the same fate.

9. For the European Christians the decline of Muslim Spain coincided with their renaissance, their rebirth and the end of The Dark Ages. The knowledge gained from studying the Arabic translations of the works of the Greeks and the others together with the original contributions of the great Muslim scholars contributed much towards the European renaissance. The astrolabe of the Arabs guided the European navigators across the oceans to discover for themselves new lands to conquer, colonise and settle. Over time the Europeans, benefiting from Muslim scholarship increased their dominance worldwide.

10. In the eastern Mediterranean the Ottoman Turkish warriors prolonged the life of the Islamic world. But the quest for knowledge was never as great as during the early years of Islam. There were some magnificent moments but eventually the Turkish Muslim Empire also degenerated. While Europe was undergoing the Industrial Revolution, nowhere in the Islamic world was there a similar phenomenon. The great craftsmen of the Muslim world who had crafted products painstakingly by hand never understood mass consumption and the demands it created. Damascus, the centre of the silk and metal industries, which supplied the countries along the Silk Road and Europe, remained as a centre for beautiful handicrafts to this day. No serious attempts have been made to innovate or even to copy new production methods so as to cope with the increasing demands of the mass-consumption market.

11. The decline of the Islamic civilisation had become continuous principally because knowledge other than that concerned with the religion of Islam was neglected or prohibited. On the other hand the intensive study of the religion has led to the numerous interpretations which divide the ummah into numerous sects and cults often at odds with each other. To the weakness caused by lack of knowledge is added that due to the break-up of the ummah into Sunnis and Syiahs and numerous sub-groups. And the Muslims have never been able to cooperate with each other since then even in the defence of the ummah and the religion.

12. Today the Muslim ummah is at its weakest. Muslim countries have not been able to adapt to the changing world. Some want to go back to the social and political

environment which prevailed at the time of the Prophet, believing that only in such an environment can they be true Muslims. What they are saying is that Islam is only suitable for the first century of the Hijrah or the 7th Century Masehi. This is a rejection of the universality of Islam and its relevance everywhere and at all times.

13. Perhaps looking at the non-Islamic world of today, Muslims have reasons to fear knowledge and development. Atheism and secularism now characterise the developed European countries, while religion has either been rejected or rendered meaningless. They have become so arrogant because of their scientific knowledge that they believe they have no need for God in order to do or create anything. Instead of natural birth they are now working on cloning all living things including Man. They learnt a little about how things happen and they believe they can duplicate anything that has been created. They can now travel through space and land on the moon. They plan to land on other planets with the desire to possess them. They think that there is nothing that they cannot do if they have the money to do it. As a result they have become thoroughly materialistic.

14. Greed is their principal motivation. They want to make more and more money without regard for the damage and the misery that they cause others and themselves in the process.

15. They have lost all moral values. Such is their belief in freedom that they permit anything to be done without any rule or restrictions. The institutions of marriage and family have been discarded. They cohabit and beget bastard children and they separate without benefit of any set of norms or traditions or law. Now they legalise same sex marriage and all kinds of homosexual practices. Even their priests can openly flout their homosexuality. The sins proscribed by their own religion are no longer regarded as sinful.

16. They invent and produce ever more powerful weapons not for self defence but in order to intimidate and attack others whom they dislike because these people are different from them. They glory in the fact that they now have the ability to wipe out the human race.

17. Obviously their worldly success has destroyed their spiritual beliefs, has made them so very arrogant. They think that their scientific knowledge contradicts all spiritual explanations regarding creation. So what need is there for God and religion.

18. What they have not paused to ask themselves is why things happen the way they do. Every time they try to reason why, they end up by explaining how things happen. They know that two atoms of hydrogen combined with one atom of oxygen will result in water. That only answers the question how. But why? Why Hydrogen and Oxygen, and not some other elements, not chlorine and nitrogen for example. No matter how they try they will find no answer to the question why. And they can find no answer to the question why for all the things around them or happening to them. Frustrated they attribute it to nature. But what is nature? There is no answer except to say that there is a power which creates and endows everything with the character and properties they have.

19. If they are not so shallow in their thinking then they would realise that science actually confirms the existence of God, of Allah. The vastness of the Universe with the huge number of stars, many of which are many times bigger than the sun, the constellations and the light years of distances between these heavenly bodies merely

testify to how much more great is the Creator. It is the shallow mind which concludes that because we know a little about how things happen and behave therefore we have no need for the spiritual, the belief in God or Allah. The scientists who are more conversant with the vastness and complexity of creation should actually be more humble and should look up to the power that creates all these. They more than anyone else should have much greater faith in the Creator, the greatness of the Creator.

20. What we are seeing happening to developed society with its materialism and lack of morality; its atheism, secularism and spiritual emptiness is due not to knowledge or material wealth but to the wrong understanding of the scientific knowledge that they possess. What they know is a tiny microcosm of Creation. There is so much more about Creation that they and we don't know. They are still very ignorant and they cannot be so arrogant as to assume that we don't need the Creator anymore, we don't need Allah and His Religion. In fact, we need religion and submission to Allah even more because He is far, far more powerful than what we have been made to believe.

21. Science should not make us lose our iman, our faith. Science should strengthen it, make us more humble and more appreciative of the Greatness of Allah and His Religion.

22. We Muslims should fear science and material progress only if they are going to make us lose our faith in our religion, in Allah. But the materialism and moral collapse of the Europeans are not due to science or material wealth. They are due to a shallow understanding of their religion, a failure to understand and appreciate that science does not answer all the questions, in particular the question "why" and that despite all the wealth and power they can acquire, in the end to dust they must return. They are still mortal no matter how powerful, how rich and clever they may be. In the end they must submit to God, to Allah. Their arrogance is misplaced and unjustified. If Allah does not will it, nothing that they do can happen.

23. We as Muslims must forever remind ourselves of our mortality, of our very brief passage on this millions of years old Earth, of our inability to understand why things happen as they do, and ultimately our need to submit to the greatness of Allah who creates everything. If we understand how insignificant we and our achievements are by comparison to the greatness of Allah, we will not lose our faith in Islam and in Allah the Almighty Creator. Science and material wealth and power will not subvert our faith. All that we do and achieve are temporary. Only Allah and His Creation is permanent.

24. Conscious of this, we should learn science, seek knowledge and accumulate wealth in the service of Allah, to defend and protect His religion and the ummah. We must not allow anyone to denigrate us or our religion. With our intellectual capacity and our material strength, we must perpetuate the true religion.

25. We should reject those teachings which deviate from the fundamentals of Islam, which denies the pursuit of knowledge, other than religious knowledge, making us ignorant and incapable of benefiting from the bounty of Allah on earth, weakening us and exposing us and our religion to oppression and humiliation.

26. We pray daily for hassanah in this world and in the next. But Allah has warned us that our prayers will not be answered unless we strive to change our fortunes ourselves. And this we can and we must do by mastering all knowledge needed and acquiring material wealth for making this change.

27. I would like to once again thank the International Islamic University of Malaysia for conferring on me the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters. I was born a Muslim but I have studied my religion because my training in Medicine threatened initially to undermine my faith. I have asked myself many questions which troubled me.

28. Science deals with facts which seems to negate pure beliefs, contradict the faith that I have been brought up with. Do I have to reject one in favour of the other or do I reject both or accept both? I know of many who believe they have sinned and try to atone for their scientific indulgences by acts of self denial, by performing new ibadat which are more onerous, by rejecting the scientific training they had acquired.

29. But my studies of both religion and science have convinced me that the two are compatible , that science in fact endorses and enhances faith, for it shows that the power of Allah is far greater than that which we are lead to believe. Science cannot replace faith for the achievement of science is limited by what Allah wills. And science can never answer the question why.

30. Those who study only religion will never fully appreciate the power of Allah and His religion. Those who study only science will become too arrogant to appreciate the meaning and the need for faith and the weakness of mortal man.

31. The religious Muslims must study science adequately and the Muslim scientist must study the fundamentals of the religion of Islam in order to save themselves and the world from the arrogance of the partially knowledgeable or partially ignorant.

32. In the new world, the Muslims with his faith and his well-rounded knowledge must show the way; the way to a religious and morally upright, materially wealthy and deeply knowledgeable world.

33. Once again I thank you for the honour conferred on me.