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TWENTIETH CENTURY"

ASSALLAMULAIKUM WARAHMATULLAHI WABARATUH

Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters,

Allow me at the outset to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the Rector of the International Islamic University of Malaysia, Professor Mohammed Kamal Hassan, for inviting me to officiate this one-day International Conference on the "Celebration of Muhammad Iqbal and his Vision of the World." Indeed, the teachings of Muhammad Iqbal are relevant, applicable and just as valuable for today's world, as they had been during his time.

2. Muhammad Iqbal was one of if not the greatest Islamic poet-philosopher of the 20th century. His lifetime devotion was to the cause of progressive Islam and the plights of the Ummah. He had given Muslims an alternative, new paradigm in the way we should look at the world around us; a world where Muslims still find themselves marginalised in their own lands, and at times in their own societies. He took it upon himself to inspire the Muslims to consolidate themselves in order to be imbued with the true spirit of Islam. Back during his time and remaining true to this day, Muslim countries do not dominate the political, scientific, economic and cultural life of the world. Instead, we were all under the colonial imperialism of Western countries, and our cultures and societies were threatened by Western thought and values. Secularism, liberalism, and modernity were breaking the seams of Muslim society everywhere. In some cases, Muslims struggled against this with force of arms and were overwhelmed by the strength and technology of the West. In other cases, they attempted to fully adopt and learn Western ways in their struggle, only to find the opposition just as strong in their own societies at what were perceived to be kafir ways.

3. Muhammad Iqbal, however, was a Muslim who was neither of these two extremes. He was a Muslim who challenged the conventional and reactionary thinking of the Islamic thought at the time, and presented a new approach for the political, social, cultural and spiritual rejuvenation of Islam. He strove for Muslims to learn and understand and accept the true meaning of Islam and adapt it in the context of the modern trials they were facing. Muhammad Iqbal emphasised that the conventional views of Islam, which must remain relevant, needed to be examined to bring it into accord with advanced scientific and philosophical knowledge. At the same time, he extolled the mystical voice of Islam for demonstrating to one's self the inner experience of God. Thus, the duty of a Muslim was to find a balance between his or her spirituality and the realities of this earthly world.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters,

4. Today, Muslims find themselves under siege - technologically backwards, weak, oppressed, and unable to defend the ummah and their faith. They are no longer masters of themselves. The challenges confronting Islam today have become more varied and complex, and range from intellectual lethargy, poverty, economic backwardness and disunity to obsessive preoccupation with the hereafter and an obscurantist mindset which damages the progressive image of Islam as a religion of peace, fit for all mankind. The events of 11th September have further seen the Western media and governments distorting facts and having a field day in equating Islam with terror. It has pushed Muslims into a corner, called upon to defend their faith and themselves against persecution and stereotyping. Fundamentalism became a bad word when in actual fact being a fundamental Muslim is what is actually desired – someone who practices the tenets of Islam, a religion of moderation.

5. Let me stress that Islam does not promote nor condone terrorism. But, while we condemn acts of terror we must also strive to comprehend the reasons for these terrorists' anger and their reactions, irrational though they may be. If Muslims commit acts of terrorism, it is because their countries are weak and incapable of fighting back, of waging wars on their enemies.

6. Yet, the truth remains that Muslims in many countries face poverty and underdevelopment. Many have taken an obscurantist and conservative Islam, and with that, the rejection of modern science and philosophy. Muslims have at times also been guilty of undermining their own religion – taking a rigid form of Islam that goes against the principles of good governance, social justice, and tolerance.

7. This is where the mindset of the Muslims must change and remain alert and in touch with the changing times. We cannot afford to not keep up with the demands of and changes in the modern world. We lament the passing of the golden age of Islam when led the world in many fields like medicine, mathematics, philosophy and others. Why is it then that we have lagged so far behind? That Muslims no longer are at the forefront of new thoughts and research. We have to arrest the decline. And, I believe we can only do so by acquiring knowledge and striving to remain progressive, at par if not ahead of the competition. Economically, intellectually and spiritually weak, Muslim nations will only be at the beck and call of the West.

8. Sadly, with the decline of Muslim intellectual tradition made worse by the traumatic effects of colonialism we have witnessed the rise of an increasingly narrow and conservative tradition of Islamic scholarship that has sadly brought us nowhere closer to the survival of knowledge-production. All is not lost, however. The major problem we face today is the politisation of religion and the abuse of educational system for clearly political and ideological ends.

9. The problems that Muslims face today are similar to those faced by Muhammad Iqbal during his time. Where we fight against the forces of neo-colonialism, and foreign pressure, Iqbal was valuable in the struggle for independence against colonial rule in his native India, and had pushed for Muslim self rule as a precursor to the birth of Pakistan in 1947.

10. Iqbal's vision of Muslims accepting an equilibrium between the earthly and the mystical finds ready resonance in Malaysia's own efforts to restore the glory of Islam through a dynamic and progressive interpretation of Islam's fundamental principles and practices by the ummah. Muslims thus, need to be united and we have to leave behind the squabbles and loathing that exists between us. Too often, the failure of Muslims to compete with others is not due to the superiority of others, but the divisions that exist between us. If only Muslims can bring their collective will and energy together; to take their faith and their will as a first step in strengthening their own spiritual selves and translating that into a shared responsibility of upholding the values, teachings, and meaning of Islam.

11. In the new Millennium, it is imperative that Muslims strive to be progressive; to accept education, and scientific knowledge as a way to develop themselves and the ummah. We cannot continue to view all modern knowledge as "western" and "un-Islamic". Not all that come from the West are bad. Likewise, not all that come from our societies are good. Iqbal had made his own search for a revitalised ummah that would be spiritually strong, intellectually sound, and practically viable. He believed that such a world could be realised only through education and proper socialisation. As our Honourable Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir has said many times before, Muslims have missed the Industrial Revolution, but in the midst of the IT revolution of the present-day, Muslims can ill-afford to miss this too. In this respect, Malaysia's persistent call to all members of the Ummah is to give equal attention to worldly pursuits as much as for the hereafter. It also stems from the realization that in the coming age of digital divide, knowledge-driven economy and borderless world, the Ummah's neglect of this responsibility would ensure Islam's continued subservience to the dictate of its enemies.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters,

12. Islam is a religion of peace. Its name even, is derived from the Arabic word 'salaam' which means peace. But as a religion of peace, Islam, unfortunately, has been manipulated many a time by those who use it for their own personal gains, based on their own narrow interpretations of the religion. In Afghanistan, we have seen how the Taliban regime perverted the religion to push their people and country to a virtual stone-age where modern trappings were found only in their weapons.

13. Since the beginning of Islam during the time of the Prophet Mohammed (s.a.w.), Islam has always tolerated and respected other religions. In the great Muslim caliphates of modern-day Spain where Muslims ruled for 800 years, Jews, and Christians stayed within their faiths and lived together with Muslims. I am indeed thankful to Allah (s.w.t.) that in Malaysia today, Muslims live, study, and work side-by-side in peace and harmony with our fellow countrymen of different faiths. We are

a Muslim country, but we also enshrine the right for every person to profess and practise their religion and persevere to ensure that Muslims and people of all faiths continue to realise this right.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters,

14. Muhammad Iqbal believed that Allah (s.w.t.) created the universe so that human beings can play their creative role with a passionate zeal for the higher ideals and universal values of truth, justice, social good, and equality. Iqbal realised that Muslims needed to not only possess spiritual vitality, but also education, and scientific education and knowledge in order to further advance. Muslims thus, have to ensure that they can balance their thoughts of the hereafter with their earthly responsibilities. This is relevant today just as it was during Iqbal's lifetime.

15. The way is still open for us to revive and develop the tradition of Islamic learning in the Muslim world, within the Muslim intellectual tradition itself. All that is required is for us to return to the fundamentals of our faith and to revive the voices of the rational thought and critical enquiry that we have silenced for so long. Islam and the Muslim world is too big to be held captive by a handful of demagogues and fanatics who have been misguided by their thirst of power at all cost.

16. We have faith in Allah (s.w.t.) and armed with in the faith of our religion, and the knowledge of science and education, I believe that Muslims can indeed create a better world for themselves. May Allah (s.w.t.) bless the soul of Iqbal, and give you success in your deliberation today.

Thank you.