

Penyampai : TAN SRI DATO SERI AHMAD SARJI BIN ABDUL HAMID
Tajuk : THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF IKIM-GOETHE SEMINAR ON THE ROLE AND
INFLUENCE OF RELIGIONS IN SOCIETY
Lokasi : CONCORDE HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR
Tarikh : 13-09-1993

I am deeply honoured to be given this opportunity to deliver a speech and officiate this seminar on "The Role and Influence of Religions in Society". I would like to put on record my appreciation and gratitude to H.E. Mr. Wilfried Vogeler, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany for his keen interest.

I would like to congratulate The Goethe Institute for their initiative to invite IKIM to jointly organise this seminar. I am very grateful that The Goethe Institute has managed to bring in four distinguished scholars from Germany to deliver papers pertaining to subjects that are of great relevance to us all. IKIM has also managed to bring in a distinguished Muslim scholar from U.S.A. I always believe that seminars and conferences of this nature should have a number of scholars from outside the country to provide us with the opportunity to view things in a different perspective.

I wish to acknowledge all the paper writers who have laboured so hard, despite other commitments, to prepare and present their papers in this seminar. Without your splendid efforts, we will not be able to hold this seminar. Our grateful thanks to the distinguished participants who have responded to our invitation to attend this seminar.

IKIM was set up with a very clear mission of correcting the image of Islam which has been unfortunately tarnished as a result of many factors. Among its many objectives, IKIM hopes to build bridges between the Muslims and people of other religious faiths, not only in this country but also abroad. This, I firmly believe, is one of the most effective ways of enhancing understanding, mutual appreciation of problems, and generating friendship among peoples of different religions. Enhancing understanding, creating appreciation and generating friendship can never be a one way process. It is meaningless to only expect others to understand our religion. It should be a two-way process.

Hence, this seminar provides the very appropriate platform for the enhancement of such understanding.

Christianity and Islam are two of the world's major religions which belong to the same Semitic religious tradition of the Abrahamic faith. Despite the fundamental differences, Christianity and Islam have many similarities by virtue of their common origin based on the traditions and legacy of the true religions of God. This was clearly exemplified by the Christian Ruler of Abyssinia, Negus, during the early period of Islam. The Muslims who migrated from Mecca to Abyssinia, on the advice of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) were brought to the Court of the Abyssinian Ruler to answer the allegations which were made against them by the pagan worshippers of Mecca led by Abu Suffiyan. After carefully listening to the explanations of the Muslim leader, Jaafar bin Abi Talib (may Allah be pleased with him), the Abyssinian Ruler dismissed Abu Suffian's false allegations and exclaimed that: "The difference between you (Muslims) and us (Christians) is just this line" (which he drew with his walking stick on the sandy floor). "But the difference between them (idolators) and us is like the earth and the sky".

There was a time before the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) migrated to Medinah, a war was fought between the Roman and the Persian Empires. The Muslims, who were small in number and ferociously persecuted by the Meccan pagan worshippers, had all their support for the Romans on account of similarities between Islam and Christianity. On the other hand, the pagan worshippers of Mecca were more sympathetic to the Persians who were Zoroastrians or worshippers of fire. The Muslims used to be sad and worried when the Romans were defeated whilst the pagan worshippers of Mecca rejoiced at the defeat of the Romans. This feeling was the genuine feeling of affinity between Christianity and Islam even when Islam was at its infancy.

The similarities between Christianity and Islam are borne by the following facts: (i) Islam affirms the existence of primordial, natural religion as a gift of God to all humans.

It is called *din al fitrah*, or the religion of nature or creation. All humans are endowed with it without exception for it comes to them at birth. It is an integral part of their personality, of their very being; (ii) Islam affirms that God did not leave mankind entirely to its own resources in the matter of acknowledging Him as God and Creator. In His Mercy, He sent prophets to convey to them His divine message that they owe religion to God alone. "There is no people but unto them We sent messenger ... There is no people but We made them recipients of the message that they owe service to God and avoidance of evil" Qur'an 35:24; 25:51; 16:36; and (iii) The Qur'an itself proclaims that "Those who believed - the Jews, the Christians, the Sabeans, and others - who believe in God, the Day of Judgement and do good deeds, stand to be rewarded by God. No fear or grief shall befall them" Qur'an 2:62; 5:72.

"Say to the Jews and Christians, we Muslims believe in that which was revealed to us as well as that which was revealed to you. Our God and your God is One and the same. We all submit to Him" Qur'an 29:46. Say, we Muslims believe in God, in what He revealed to us, to Ibrahim, Ismail, Ishaq, Ya'qub and the tribes, to Moses, Jesus and all the revelations of the prophets - without discriminating between them. To God we submit" Qur'an 2:136.

Despite the similarities that exist between Islam and Christianity, sometimes we witness great differences between us, not only in terms of our behaviour towards one another, but also in terms of our treatments towards one another.

In today's civilised and enlightened world, one's nation is the standard of right and wrong. An individual will support the standpoint of his nation. He does not consider whether that standpoint is based on justice or in-justice.

But Islam gives us a teaching of another type. It says that in righteousness and piety one should rise above the level of nation and help everyone. But in matters of sin and aggression, one should not help anyone, even if the latter be one's relation. It attaches no importance as to who says something. It gives importance to what is being said. Ali, the fourth Caliph, says: "Don't see who is telling you something. See what he is telling you." In the early Middle Ages, the caliphal courts of Damascus, Baghdad and Cordova witnessed countless meetings of Jews, Christians and Muslims in which the learned adherents debated the three faiths. The reigning culture gave such honour to the three religions, such respect to their principles and institutions, that inter-religious debate was the subject of conversation everywhere, a public pastime. Jewish-Christian dialogue has been making great strides since the end of World War II. It has already established for itself a viable tradition and a rich literature. In most such dialogues, the Muslims are invited guests of dialogues initiated by Christians who play hosts.

The outcomes of such dialogues are far from satisfactory since the guests have to respect the host and vice versa.

"God is our Lord and your Lord. For us (is the responsibility for) our deeds and for you for your deeds.

There is no contention between us and you. God will bring us together and to Him is our final goal".

Islam is the first religion which has treated peaceful co-existence as the foundation of collective life.

According to Islam, there is no compulsion in matters of belief. It says there is no hardship in matters of religion. This is a matter of the mind and the heart.

Whoever wants may accept a belief. He who does not want to accept a belief may reject it. It has also taught that you should not abuse even the idols, lest the polytheists out of lack of understanding, begin to revile God. It goes further and invites the followers of other religions to co-operate in matters common between them.

The Qur'an says: "O People of the Book come together on a word which is common to us." In this verse also the same large-hearted viewpoint about other religions has been repeated. It says: We do not want

to enter into any altercation with you in the matter of religion our Prophet has already communicated Out message to you. If you do not believe in it. then you may rest content with your own religion. We will rest content with ours. Who is on the right path will be decided by Him to Whom all of us shall return. This is the Qur'anic teaching of toleration which has led the Muslims to observe the principle that humanity should be respected. When during the days of the Prophet, a deputation of the Christians of Najran visited Medina, the Prophet asked them to stay in his own mosque and did not give thought to the fact that they were believers in Trinity, instead of in the Unity of God.

IKIM will organize more seminars of this nature with the objective to promote mutual understanding and cooperation of the major religions. On this note, I now declare this seminar officially opened.