

The Role and importance of interfaith work*

By

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Bismillah Hir Rahma Nir Rahim (I begin with name of God the Most Kind the Most Merciful). I greet you with the greetings of Islam (**Assalamu Alaykum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakathu** (May God's blessing and peace be with us all.)

From the out set I give you the greetings of our national umbrella organisation **Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) Secretary General Bother Iqbal Sacranie** MBE for this auspicious occasion where all major faiths and where people from all major political persuasion are represented to discuss the issues concern us. People of faith or no convictions have to recognize the importance of Dialogue.

The Necessity of Inter-religious Dialogue:

In my faith tradition the Holy Qur'an commands believers for interfaith co-operation "**to come to common grounds**" (3:64). As a Muslim I have been ordered to build good relations with all people of the world (49:13 & (16:40); work for peace everywhere and whenever possible with others (2:208) & 8:61); cooperate with others in furthering virtue and God-consciousness (5:2); seek and secure human welfare, promote justice and peace (4:114) and do good to others (28:77) and not to break your promise made to others (16:91). The Holy Qur'an tells believers that those who do good deeds and help others are the best creation (98:6). **The Holy Prophet of Islam made it clear that "Religion is man's treatment of other fellow-beings" (Bukhari & Muslim); and "the best among you is he who does good deeds in serving other people" (Ahmad & Tabrani).**

The Prophet of Islam (May the peace of God be upon him) practiced this ideal for interfaith dialogue himself while talking to Jews, Christians and other faith traditions and people with no faith on issues concerning life and death and relevant matters. The Prophet of Islam confirmed this is writing explicitly in the Charter of Medina in 622 CE. The Holy Qur'an not only recognized religious pluralism as accepting of the others as legitimate socio-religious communities but also accepting the spirituality of the others. The preservation of the sanctity of the places of worship of other faiths is paramount in Islamic tradition (22:40). The Holy Qur'an is full of many examples but time does not permit me to dwell on this.

The Role of Religion:

Religion brings joy and hopes to millions of people in the world. Religion is a social force that can be harnessed to build bridges or manipulated to erect walls. Living and working together in today's multicultural, multi-religious and multi faith society is not always easy. Faith communities have huge human and financial resources. Religion motivates its followers for doing good deeds such as raising funds for good causes, helping elderly and needy people in our communities and motivating their followers to volunteer for many social issues in our society.

Religion harnesses deep emotions, which can sometimes take destructive forms. Where this happens, we must draw on our faith to bring about reconciliation and understanding. The truest fruits of our faith are healing the wounds of the past and being positive to construct trust and fellowship between different people.

We have a great deal to learn from one another, which enriches us without undermining our own identities. Together, listening and responding with openness and respect, we can move forward to work in ways that acknowledge genuine differences but build on shared hopes and values.

The need of Inter-religious Dialogue:

The famous German theologian Prof Hans Kung once said, “No peace among nations without peace among religions, and no peace among religions without dialogue between the religions”. **The Caux 2002 Dialogue: An honest conversation among concerned Muslims and non-Muslims on Peace, Justice and Faith added,** “No peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness and compassion”. Among many prerequisites of meaningful dialogue are active listening, honest conversation, accepting the other’s vision whether agreeing or disagreeing, and acknowledging the other’s pain.

In today’s world there is a dire need of inter-religious dialogue. There are common values that human beings share irrespective of religion, nationality or ethnicity. These values include the sanctity of life, freedom, equality, respect for human rights, international humanitarian law, commitment to cultural and religious diversity, human dignity, human development, democracy, the rule of law, and equitable access to the earth’s resources and equitable distribution of power.

Religion: Bridge building or Wall Erecting?

We should see religion as a total way of life anchored in faith in God and expressing itself in ethical conduct at the individual and social level. Justice, love and compassion - values that are highly cherished in any religion - rather than form, ritual and symbol, should propel this way of life. Since these values are universal, religion, which serves as a conduit for them, should also be preached and practised in a genuinely universal manner. This is what one expects the practitioners of the religions to do in the coming century to counter the challenge of globalisation. They should discard the narrow, exclusive concept of religion, which often confines virtue and goodness to one's own kind. Justice and compassion in this exclusive approach seldom transcends one's own religious boundaries. We should eliminate forever such religious exclusivism. In a sense, certain aspects of globalisation may make it easier for us to put across the universal, all-embracing message of religion and its core values. Given the worldwide reach of the media we have today, for the first time in history the opportunity exists to convey to humankind as a whole the universal essence of each of our religions. Instead of allowing narrow-minded bigots to monopolise the airwaves, why shouldn't men and women with a universal outlook state their case through the global media infrastructure? Even more important, societies everywhere, as we have observed, are becoming less and less exclusive and more and more multi-religious.

It is as if social reality itself is forcing us to get rid of our exclusive attitudes and develop a universal

orientation to our religion, which will be more accommodating of 'the other'. Indeed, one gets the feeling that each and every society is slowly, often painfully, beginning to realise what "humanity as a single family" means. Perhaps this is the path that nations must take for a universal community founded upon our common humanity to emerge. It is a community that globalisation will never be able to achieve. When such a universal community of different religions and peoples bound by their common humanity becomes a reality, we will understand what the illustrious mystic, Jallaluddin Rumi, meant when he wrote, "The lamps are different but the light is the same." In brief, religion motivates its followers to do good deeds such as charitable work and encourages doing common good for the betterment of all humanity.

Interplay of Religion and Politics

Although a deep understanding of the interaction between the political and religious spheres requires a systematic and elaborate examination of their meaning, I will limit my statement to delineating their boundaries and identifying a few areas of friction between the two.

Religion refers to those aspects of life that relate to the determination of the total meaning of existence. It is concerned, in particular, with three grand questions about human existence: its origin, its purpose, and its destiny. Although the above three questions can be raised from a philosophical point of view, the religious response to them is distinguished from the philosophical by the degree of conviction one enjoys over the other. That is to say, a religious conclusion with regard to the above grand questions is not only supported by rational arguments, but by emotional attachment and possibly spiritual experience as well.

This difference gives religion an advantage over philosophy in that it makes religiously based convictions a better springboard for action. It is a fact of history that people with deep religious conviction are willing to endure greater difficulties and make greater sacrifices in pursuit of their religious ideals than those whose attachment to their ideals is based on purely rational calculations. Paradoxically though, religion's source of strength is also its source of weakness. For it is always easier to dissuade people from erroneous points of view when the latter are based on theoretical arguments rather than religious convictions. And while shared religious conviction can create more harmony in the public sphere, the possibilities of interpersonal and inter-communal conflicts are bound to increase in multi-religious societies.

In Search of a Common Ground

The question that preoccupies us as implied by the theme is this: Can we find a common ground on which all human beings stand comfortably in a democratic and pluralist society? My answer is a resounding yes. The Qur'an directs the Muslims to find a common ground with other communities. This common ground is expressed as a mutual respect of the freedom and autonomy of different religious communities. That none should appropriate to them the right to impose their way of life on other religious communities. The Qur'an is also clear that there can be no force in matter religious. The Qur'an urges Muslims to seek a political order based on peaceful cooperation and mutual respect, and warns them against placing religious solidarity over covenanted rights and the

principles of justice

Religious conflict, particularly between Islam and Christianity in the past, or more recent conflict between Israel and Palestine, more often than not rose out of human excesses and the desire to stir religious passion to support political goals. It is true that these Abrahamic religions (Islam / Judaism / Christianity) advance a slightly different conceptualisation of God and of humanity's relation to the divine, but doctrinal differences are not limited to inter-religious relationships. One can find more doctrinal diversity within each of these world religions than between them. Muslims, Jews and Christians, on the other hand, share similar core values of respect of human life and dignity, and profound commitment to charity and the common good.

Good deeds and Moral values:

As a Muslim I believe that faith in the broadest sense includes all that is good in life, and Islam emerged as a moral challenge for humanity to respond to the call of the faith with active submission to Divine Will, with a commitment to obey the Creator in providing welfare to all beings in the society without any consideration to race, gender, language, colour, culture, physical build or ethnic origin. The goal of Islam - of its concepts, worship and teachings relating to values, attitudes, morals and behaviour - is to create an Islamic personality of an individual Muslim preparing himself for a wider role in this life. Belief in Islam is not a simple assent to a dogma. All Islamic beliefs have a reference to an action. Good actions become a part of Islamic faith, which leads to a more virtuous life. Man is thus accountable for his own actions and behaviour. Humans have the responsibility to choose and implement a moral and righteous life in obedience to God's commandments for common good

The Qur'an and teachings of the Prophet of Islam strongly suggest that Faith without the backing of good deeds is meaningless. Faith based on **Aqida** (belief system) leads towards good deeds and good deeds prepare a man for a full Islamic personality. Islamic concepts of **Taqwa** (God Consciousness), **Falah** (well being) and **Hayat Tayyibiah** (good life) facilitate the realisation of an Islamic personality - when a Muslim seriously pursues the broader goals of the creation believing that **mankind is but one community and striving hard with others for freedom, justice, and peace**. It is upon an individual Muslim to build Islamic qualities, values and morals such as **brotherliness, sincerity, honesty, truthfulness, pursuit of knowledge, responsibility, integrity, fair dealing, keeping promises, discipline and self-control, humility, patience, courage, thankfulness, modesty, honour and self-respect, warmth and lovingness, generosity, hospitality, charitableness, kindness, helpfulness, respect, tolerance and mutual understanding, obeying the commandments and abstaining from the prohibitions**. These attributes transcend religious belief.

Collectively on a community level, a Muslim's obligation is to establish what is right and eradicating what is wrong; Strive for an Islamic identity supporting, promoting and protecting a Muslim way of family life; Dealing with health and educational issues and for the creation of a condition wherein perseverance of mutual compassion and well-being prevail for the benefit of the individual. On national and international levels a Muslim must work towards a better and peaceful world. With their own actions and deeds they can dispel myths and misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims. The Muslim community has a great responsibility in promoting the teaching of Islam and its values as a part of a global Muslim **Ummah** (World Community). Muslims must squarely confront the reality of British secular trends and adopt a different approach in their strategy in a minority setting of **Darul Ahad** (Domain of alliance and treaty agreement) from the majority setting of **Darul Islam** (Domain of Peace) where Muslims have power and authority over their own affairs.

Theological Foundations for Religions Pluralism:

Through my reading of the sacred text of the **Qur'an and Sunnah**, I have come to conclusions that are relevant to the application of the Qur'an to contemporary society, particularly with regard to democracy and pluralism. First, one of the core principles of Muslim belief is **shura**, which means consultation. This was how the Prophet consulted with his companions on making decisions for his society. In the Qur'an, shura is mentioned twice, as a fundamental belief, just like prayer, and as a practice, according to the time in which one lives. In our times, genuine shura means genuine pluralism of points of view, and democracy. Second, this view of shura changes the concept of Jihad, which we hear so much about from the fundamentalists.

The foundations out of which an Islamic perspective on any topic should arise are nothing less than the authentic sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Both the Qur'an and the Hadith embrace and affirm **Ikhtilaf**, i.e. differences in belief, perspectives and viewpoints, as being natural and an essential part of the human condition. A denial of the right of others to hold beliefs and views, which are different and incompatible to one's own, is tantamount to a denial of Allah himself. In the Holy Qur'an, chapter 10, verse 99, Allah, the Sublime, declares:

“If your Lord had so desired, all the people on the earth would surely have come to believe, all of them; do you then think, that you could compel people to believe?”

And again in Qur'an, chapter 11, verse 118, Allah, the Sublime, declares:

“And had your Lord so willed, He could surely have made all human beings into one single community: but (He willed it otherwise, and so) they continue to hold divergent views.”

Both of these verses establish the principle of freedom of belief and thought in Islam. At the conclusion of the first verse, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is himself reproved for transgressing this principle by being over-enthusiastic in convincing others with regard to the truth of Islam. Thus the Qur'an stresses that the differences in beliefs, views and ideas of humankind is not incidental and negative but represents an Allah-willed, basic factor of human existence. The challenge which the principle of freedom of belief and thought in Islam holds for us is to develop clear ethics and find mechanisms to manage and deal with the differences of beliefs and theologies that exist. This is the challenge that religious pluralism holds for us.

Interfaith Dialogue:

Interfaith Dialogue among people of different religious communities is more needed today than ever before. For many of us involved in this process, dialogue is an avenue to explain one's own faith to the other and to learn a little about the religion of one's dialogue partner. There are some who would like to see this dialogue go beyond **‘knowing one another’**. They hope that through active intellectual interaction and engagement a shared universal spiritual-moral worldview will emerge which will serve as the basis of a new truly just and compassionate global civilisation.

What they are seeking is not just inter-religious understanding but the nurturing of a deep human bond of love and empathy transcending religious affiliation. Individuals who live in fear and lack of comprehension of other cultures are more likely to resort to acts of hatred, violence and destruction against a perceived “enemy”. Those who are exposed to the cultures of others and learn about them through communications across cultural divides are more likely to see diversity as strength and celebrate it as a gift. Today, globalisation, migration and communication are bringing different

racess, cultures, ethnicities and religions into even closer contact with each other. People can and should take pride in their particular faith or heritage but share common human values.

People of faith always come together at the time of difficulty. They draw instructions from their own faith to bring reconciliation and understanding as truest fruits of religion is healing. People of faith do talk about: the danger of war and destruction by the powerful nations, lack of clean water to millions people on our planet, poverty, hunger, air pollution and our regard to environment, the increasing erosion of common human moral values and many other concerns such as peace, justice, tolerance and dialogue.

Regardless of any influence of religious teaching in their daily lives, such values generally accepted by all: love, respect, mercy, forgiveness, charity, brotherhood, dignity of human life and human rights etc. Most of these values are derived from religious beliefs. However, Interfaith movement has to involve itself in major moral issues which world is facing today. Interfaith dialogue is the only answer to religious exclusiveness. Sad is a nation whose young people have no dreams; sadder yet is a nation where the old try to kill the dreams of their young.

In 1981 Isaiah Berlin once wrote a note on “Prejudice” :

“For things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals or groups that he or she or they are in the sole possession of the truth; especially about how to live, what to be and do, and that those who differ from them are not merely mistaken but wicked or mad, and need restraining or suppressing. It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right; have a magical eye which sees the truth and that others cannot be right if they disagree”.

Spiritual-moral Imperatives: Missing dimension of state craft:

The adulation of wealth and the immortalisation of so-called ‘creators’ of wealth have raised fundamental questions, which go beyond economic philosophy. Have we legitimised and institutionalised greed and selfishness as no civilisation before us has ever done? Isn’t it true that the legitimisation of greed has challenged the moral fabric of contemporary society? From an ethical perspective, isn’t it becoming increasingly evident that economic acquisitiveness now wears the mask of social respectability? If acquisitiveness has become respectable and greed has become legitimate, isn’t it because we have consciously sought to separate economic endeavour from moral considerations? This is why the great task that awaits us in this century is to provide a moral foundation and a moral framework to the monumental challenge of eradicating poverty. Indeed, all economic endeavours should be guided by spiritual and moral criteria. There are perhaps at least four fundamental spiritual-moral imperatives that should govern the conduct of our economic affairs. Some Europeans are concerned about their faith and moral situation in secular European Society

WAR: A moral dilemma:

Every war is a product of human failure. In Iraq we have seen the powerlessness of innocent civilians caught between two evils - another example of a humanitarian disaster and tragedy of a huge magnitude. The suffering caused by 12 years of sanctions was multiplied by the brutal, dictatorial and ruthless regime; the ordinary citizens of Iraq had no choice but to be patient. The ‘Gulf war II’ was the most controversial war in living memory. It divided the world into two opposite camps. Interfaith movement was also divided into pro and anti war camps. So many commented on the moral issues of the war on Iraq especially whether it is legal or can be justified.

Many religious leaders opposed this war on the basis that it is premature and not needed. The doctrine of the pre-emptive strike cannot be justified on moral grounds and this will definitely lead to anarchy in the world.

The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Williams summed up these moral arguments in his famous Easter 2003 sermon. He said "For months now, we have witnessed a profound and disturbing moral argument raging backwards and forwards in this country over the rightness of the war against Iraq. You'll have noticed the way in which some opponents of the war insisted that the motives of those in power must be personally corrupt, greedy, dishonest and bloodthirsty – as if the question could be settled simply by deciding on the wickedness of individuals. Equally though, there have been defenders of the war who have accused its critics of being unable to tell good from evil, of colluding with monstrous cruelty and being indifferent to the suffering of nations. On one side, people seem to see equivalence between Saddam Hussein and the coalition leaders; on the other, equivalence between Saddam Hussein and a grandmother from Surrey, a JP and Conservative voter, who finds herself, much to her amazement, on the anti-war march in February. 'Imperialists', 'butchers', cries the one side, 'blood for oil!' 'Appeasers', shouts the other, 'Useful idiots.'

This is not simply about how we conduct controversies (though it has some relevance to that, to the barbarous superficiality of some of our public arguments). It is about that odd and not very pleasant tendency in our hearts to ignore the mixture of motives and the uncertainties of understanding that lie behind our own decisions, to deny the elements of chance and hidden prejudice, temperament and feeling that make up our minds, even on the most profound matters. It is about the fear that if we admit this sort of mixture in ourselves we fail to distance ourselves clearly enough from what we believe to be evil. It leads to a further darkening of our minds, as we try to make out that the effects of the war are exactly what would confirm our initial judgments. It is a great victory; 'all the problems will disappear very soon, and reports of regional discontent are much exaggerated'. Or it is a catastrophe; 'we are on the edge of social and political collapse in the Middle East and the demise of international law'. It is indeed a clinging, gripping tightly on to whatever perspective we are comfortable with and allowing no time to wait for a fuller discernment to be born. The truth is that we don't yet see clearly. And even if we did, that would not settle the moral rights and wrongs of the conflict's origins".

Poverty and the Gap between Rich and Poor: The Biggest threat to World peace:

The World is divided between the rich and the poor, which poses the greatest threat to the future of humankind. It was this divide, which right through the ages caused great social upheavals. It sometimes gave birth to peasant uprisings. On occasions, it sparked off political revolution. Poverty already claiming many victims, as millions are starving although we have enough food for six billion people of earth; millions do not have clean water for drinking and this gap is widening due to unjust trading systems, shameful agricultural and fishery policies and a crushing debt problems.

Today, the divide between rich and poor has assumed a new and potentially more dangerous dimension. As the tidal wave of globalisation creates a borderless world, the rich and poor are emerging as global entities whose destinies are no longer determined by domestic forces. The wealth of the global rich, for instance, is sustained to a considerable degree by global enterprises and global markets just as the poverty of the global poor is caused to some extent at least by international trade regimes and the ebb and flow of foreign investments. It is of course true that, "(In) the past 50 years poverty has fallen more than in the previous 500 years And it has been reduced in some respects in almost all countries."

This blatant injustice is a ground for violent conflicts. Nonetheless, absolute poverty remains a

major scourge facing humanity at the beginning of the 21st Century. A third – "1.5 billion people – live on incomes of less than US \$ one a day." 515 million people in South Asia live in absolute poverty; 220 million in Sub-Saharan Africa; 110 million in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1960 for instance, "the 20% of the world's people who live in the richest countries had 30 times the income of the poorest 20%-by 1995 82 times as much income." Consequently wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. According to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 1998 Human Development Report, "the world's 225 richest people have a combined wealth of over one trillion, equal to the annual income of the poorest 47% of the world's people (2.5 billion). The three richest people have assets that exceed the combined GDP of the 48 least developed countries."

Over the last five years, the number of people living on less than one US\$ a day has risen from 1 billion to 1.3 billion. 840 million people – as many as the combined populations of Canada, the United States, Japan and Europe - go hungry every day. Meanwhile the gap between the richest and the most impoverished is widening more and more rapidly. An average pet cat in Norway has more spent on it in a year than the annual earnings of most people in Sub-Saharan Africa. Is this scandalous situation beyond the control of the religious and spiritual communities, or can they do something to change it? How can a spiritual and moral vision help to solve the complex issues of our day?

Religious communities have a depth of knowledge of the poor, which is shared by few others. For thousands of years, faith-based organisations have been, in the best of cases, part of the poor. Many of their leaders are poor themselves, they live in poor areas and have poor friends. Moreover they don't tend to come and go. They stay where they are, firmly rooted. Poverty is, however, only a "virtue" if it is undertaken as a voluntary witness, and as a way of showing solidarity. There are no grounds in any religion for assuming that hunger and homelessness, for example, are the will of God or a manifestation of the divine order. It is for this reason that religious organisations have always worked to counteract poverty, by providing services, such as health care and education, or programmes to open up economic outlets for peasant farmers, rural and urban artisans, fisher people and traders. They can give countless examples of ways in which, mostly at a local level, they have been successful in overcoming the most detrimental aspects of poverty. They thus have a key contribution to make to the improvement of the planning and implementation of development programmes.

The aim of globalisation to integrate the people of the world into a single economic system is not a-moral or value-free. The religious traditions' vision of people belonging to a worldwide family, whether as creatures of the same Creator or as ever-changing beings whose existence depends on others, is not reflected in the reality we see around us. Religious insights and a deepening of the spiritual dimensions to life have a unique role to play in providing new hope and purpose, which bring release from the desire for power and status.

The teaching of the religious traditions to bring an end to suffering (Buddhism) and to care for the poor (which in some, such as Islam and Judaism, explicitly means enabling the poor to earn their own living), can enlighten and inspire people to be enthusiastic about contributing to building up a "right balance" or more just relationships in society. There are many creative ways in which the rich can and do share responsibility with the poor, one of which is the Muslim banking system whereby the money lender demands no interest, but shares in any profits made. This is why the great task that awaits us in the 21st century is to provide a moral foundation and a moral framework to the monumental challenge of eradicating poverty. Indeed, all economic endeavours should be guided by spiritual and moral criteria.

Leaders from the different spiritual and religious traditions have a moral obligation to propagate the

concept of a justly balanced middle community at the local, national, regional and global level. It is a concept that has to be further refined and developed through research, analysis and reflection. How it will shape specific policies aimed at eradicating poverty and transforming the economy will depend upon the ability of economists and social planners with a spiritual-moral vision to give the concept the substance and content it deserves. Indeed, one would like to see how the justly balanced middle approach would impact upon politics, culture, technology, ethnic relations and other spheres of life.

Annihilation: Armament: Our Mutual Responsibility:

We live in the presence of monstrous military potentials, enough to eradicate life on this planet. This overemphasis on military means encourages the belief that might is right and peace can be achieved through strength. Some facts:

- 1) **Nuclear threat** is greater than ever, despite the recent agreement about the reduction of number of nuclear weapons. Most people are not aware of the development of a whole new generation of nuclear arms and introduction of a new “pre-emptive “strategy widening the possibility of actual use of nuclear weapons. I remind you of the warning given by former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe US General Goodpaster: “I realise that the notion nuclear arms bring security, the idea that somehow we were in charge, that somehow all of this was infallible and manageable and we could make it work is totally flawed”
- 2) **New arms technologies** are under preparation. During the Afghanistan and recent Gulf War, despite the powerful manipulation of the international media, a glimpse has been seen – terrible effects of the cluster bomb, the daisy-cutter and thermo-baric bombs. All major powers have massive weapons of mass destruction – only United States of America’s weapons can destroy the whole world eleven times over.
- 3) **Excessive military Spending** will soon reach the outrageous level of \$1000 Billion a year worldwide (over 40% of which is for US only). We in Britain are ready to spend millions to wage war against Iraq (where certainly civilians will die) rather spend a portion of this money on decent wages for fire fighters, for example. Actually we live in an absurd paradoxical situation: rising military expenditure that does not lead to enhanced security but to a greater insecurity.
- 4) **Weaponisation of Space.** This is a spine chilling fact that next to existing theatres of warfare on land, sea and air, a fourth theatre is in full preparation: Space. Details can be found in US Space agency, **Vision 2020**. For absolute supremacy the next war will be fought in space, from earth into space and from space to earth.
- 5) **Progressive Ecological Degradation:** I consider that the alarming rate of Ecological Degradation will lead to a serious degradation of the quality of life and will lead to irreparable damage to our natural environment. Just to mention a few consequences: global climate changing; bird and mammals species are disappearing at the rate 100 to 1000 times the rate at which extinctions naturally occur. Seventy percent of marine fisheries are either fished to capacity or over fished. Half of the tropical forests are gone; most people will soon live in water stressed areas.

For further information Please see speeches of **Edy Korthals Altes** of The Hague, made at Caux (Switzerland) August 2002. He is the author of “Heart and Soul for Europe: An Essay on Spiritual

Renewal”, He is a Former Ambassador of the Netherlands and is currently an Honorary President of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP)

Islam and Challenge of Modernity:

What is relation between Islam and modernity? Is Islam really against modernity? First let us see what modernity is. According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary modern means, 1) “of the present and recent times” and 2) “in current fashion; not antiquated.” Keeping this definition in view the question arises: To what extent will there be a relationship between religion and modernity? The next question then arises: What is religion? What constitutes religion? If religion is of a permanent nature what exactly ensures its permanence? These are important questions to be dealt with if we have to grapple with the issue of Islam and modernity. Religion is not only set of rituals but also set of beliefs, values and institutions. A religion also gives a thought system to its people. Any religion, despite its eternity carries the birthmarks of its historical circumstances. This social and historical context is as important in understanding religion as its own eternity. Since followers of religion have strong emotional bonds with their religion they accept whatever reaches them as permanent lock, stock and barrel. They often refuse to take notice of changes in historical context.

Here arises the question of whether everything inherited by a believer, by way of religious rituals, institutions, values and thought systems is permanent and unchangeable or dynamic and adaptable. The religious leaders and faithful would say yes, they are permanent. The reformers, on the other hand, would advocate changes in certain practices and traditions. Modernity, as pointed out above, relates to what is recent as opposed to what is ancient or old. Thus there is bound to be some kind of incongruity between religion and religious traditions and what is construed as modernity. All religions, not only Islam, face this challenge earlier or later depending as when modernity dawns in the area where that religion has its way. Christianity faced it much earlier than other religions.

Here we should keep in mind that modernity cannot be defined only as something temporal or related to time. It is to be dealt with also as something to do with mental approach and way of accepting or rejecting a proposition. In other words we have to speak of modernity as value. Also, it would be wrong to think that modernity was accepted by other religions without struggle whereas Muslims resisted it. All religions went through a crisis of modernity, though the degree of crisis might have varied. It would also be wrong to think that any religious community accepts or rejects modernity uniformly. The intellectual elite of the community as well as other beneficiaries may accept it more readily than others. It is also true that the Islamic world in general has been very late in accepting modernity. Other religions or other peoples did it earlier or with less resistance. But nowhere it was accepted without struggle or resistance

Rule of Law and Civil Society:

Some of the major ideas associated with democracy and human rights are in harmony with Islamic thought. The rule of law, a cardinal principle of democratic governance, is central to Islamic jurisprudence. Centuries ago, Islam recognised that all decisions, acts and procedures of public authorities at `all levels cannot be valid or legally binding save to the extent they are consistent with the law'. This is, of course, linked to the concept of `due process'. As in any society based upon democratic norms and procedures, Islamic law states that **“you cannot deprive a man of life, liberty or property except by due process of law”**. The emphasis given to virtuous, honest and upright Rulers themselves should not obscure us to the other side of Muslim history: The presence

of countless Caliphs and Sultans who violated every moral code in their conduct of the affairs of state. They not only abused power and indulged in corrupt practices; many of them were utterly ruthless and incredibly cruel. **4Rs: Rights, Responsibilities, Relationships and Roles** in the Qur'an are closely intertwined. For instance, if one values one's role as a parent one would also become aware of the rights one enjoys, the responsibilities one bears, the relationships one sustains. As a parent one has certain rights over one's child; at the same time one has to fulfil certain responsibilities. In order to exercise one's rights and responsibilities, one has to actively maintain a loving relationship with one's child. It is this relationship, which, in turn, defines one's role, that endows one's role with meaning and purpose. The importance of maintaining this intimate, intricate link between right and responsibility is underscored by the grim tragedies unfolding in yet another sphere of social and human relationships.

Integration vs. Ghettoisation:

The major five religious practices of Islam, by their very nature, exemplify the community. Whether it is in the prayer (**Salah**) or the fasting (**Saum**), the payment of the poor (**Zakah**) or the pilgrimage (**Hajj**) – it is this community dimension, which, through brotherhood and solidarity, transcends to the very essence of a Muslim's being. Beyond his immediate family, the community is the first setting for a Muslim's social enlightenment. There are numerous Islamic teachings that guide the heart and spirit towards attaining individual fullness, which has as its source, the community - a place of faith and spirituality. In other words, if one refers to Islam, one must then automatically allude to a community of beings, of faith, spirituality and brotherhood. This is a fundamental component of the everyday religious practice. One should not confuse a community based on faith with an ambitious community whose sole purpose is to be isolated and to stand out within the social, political and legislative framework. This whole notion of intellectual and physical segregation is alien to the very spirit of Islam. Practicing one's faith within a community is one thing; isolating oneself from the surrounding society is another. Legally and politically speaking, Muslims must be considered as individuals who can exercise their conscience with regards to their rights and obligations as citizens. This would then imply knowledge of laws and participation in the social, political, and economic climate. To put it simply, Muslims should have a genuine feeling of belonging within the society they live. The community is the place for enlightenment of the spirit and should provide serenity and an intellectual vigour that allows for the blossoming of the Muslim individual as a citizen.

Islamophobia and Social Exclusion:

After 11th September 2001, the wave of anti-Muslim prejudice and attacks on European and American Muslims was more than doubled comparing from the statistics available during the Gulf War in 1991. Muslims from all backgrounds were threatened day and night, and suffered an acute sense of vulnerability in their homes and mosques, as well as on the streets. Several Muslims were killed in retaliation. A number of mosques endured arson attacks. To address the issue of Islamophobia, the American Congress passed laws providing further protection against anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hostility. European Muslims have no specific protection under the present laws so recourse to the judicial system is impossible. I think that European Governments must outlaw Religious Discrimination and enact laws against the incitement of religious hatred and vilification of religious sanctities. It is important to amend the present Public Order, Crime and Disorder, Human Right and Race Relation current legislations urgently to protect many innocent lives. This would be an act to exclude Extremism and fanaticism from our multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-faith our Society in 21st Century.

Combating Terrorism and Fear:

Terrorism is a plight that must be fought. No amount of anger and discontent can justify the targeting of non-combatant civilians with the brutality we all witnessed on September 11, 2001. The level of destruction inflicted on civilians, the brutality with which the terrorist attacks were executed, and the fact that the terrorist design is undertaken by extensive deliberation and determination sent shockwaves throughout the world, and brought condemnation from foes and friends alike. Targeting thousands of unarmed civilians, using civilian airliners carrying civilian passengers, and bringing down two of the most spectacular buildings in the whole planet, in a drama that was played on live TV in front of millions of viewers, made the attacks even more sinister and apocalyptic.

But terrorism cannot be fought by mystifying it or by ignoring its root causes. The first step for developing a sound strategy to effectively combat terrorism is to examine the conditions that give rise to the anger, frustration, and desperation that fuel all terrorist acts. To focus on individuals and organizations that employ terror, while ignoring the socio-political circumstances that give rise to acts of desperation, can potentially strengthen the arms of the terrorists. A devastating force unleashed against elusive groups can exacerbate the very conditions that gave rise to resentment, frustration, and anger. Terrorism is fuelled by the actions of exclusivist regimes that privilege some and deny basic rights to others. Rogue governments that use state security agencies and excessive force to silence critics and political opposition fuel it. To be effective in fighting terrorism we must dry the swamps of abuse and injustice that breed radicalism all over the world.

Peace and Justice:

Islam is a religion of peace. This fact is borne by both Islamic teachings and the very name of “**Islam.**” The term Islam essentially means to submit and surrender one’s will to a higher truth and a transcendental law, so that one can lead a meaningful life informed by the divine purpose of creation, and where the dignity and freedom of all human beings can be equally protected. Islamic teachings assert the basic freedom and equality of all peoples. Islam stresses the importance of mutual help and respect, and directs Muslims to extend friendship and good will to all, regardless of their religious, ethnic, gender, cultural, linguistic or racial background.

Islam, in fact, makes of peace at every greeting, which Muslims exchange whenever they meet by saying, "Peace be unto you" (**Assalamu 'Alaykum**). The Muslim also utters this statement at the end of every ritual prayer. From its inception, the Qur'an emphasized peace as an intrinsic Islamic value. In fact, the terms "**Islam**" and "**Peace**" have the same root, **salaam**. Furthermore, God has chosen the word peace (**salaam**) as the Muslim's greeting to remind believers as one of God's attributes.

Islam commands Muslims to be just and fair in all circumstances even if it may go against oneself or their next of kin. The universe is constructed on what the Qur'an calls the *mizan*, or a balance. That balance is justice. The Glorious Qur'an says: “And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance (of Justice), In order that ye may not transgress (due) balance, So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance” [*Al-Qur'an 55:9*] Justice is essential to maintain the balance of the human mind. Whenever any human being is deprived of justice, the mind is inclined to imbalance. The greater the injustice, the greater is the likelihood of imbalance. That is the reason the Glorious Qur'an warns against allowing hatred to cloud one's judgment and sense of justice. The

verses of Qur'an confirms the uncompromising stand on Justice: "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you swerve, and if you distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that you do." (4:135). For The Declaration of World Muslim Leaders Summit held in Jakarta in December 2001

Forgiveness: A different outlook and a new start:

In Islamic history one may find an outlook of a different nature. When the Romans conquered any country, the first thing they would do is massacre. When the Muslims entered any country, they would give guarantees of life, property and honour to all the non-belligerents. Even in war Muslims are not allowed to kill an old person, a woman, children, or those who are crippled or disabled. Not only that, even trees are not to be cut and crops are not to be burnt. The entirety of Islamic history does not know of the concept of mass killing or massacre of enemies. One cannot find one single example of any Inquisition or ethnic cleansing on the name of Islam

I draw your attention to look to the actions of the Holy Prophet of Islam when he entered Makkah as victor. **Everyone was offered amnesty and complete forgiveness.** When Caliph Umar entered Jerusalem he was not even prepared to pray in a Church for fear that those who came after him may treat the place as a mosque and take it away from the Christians. But when the Crusaders took the city of Jerusalem there was a total massacre of the population. What happened in Spain? Not a single Muslim or Jew was left unexecuted or un-exiled. It was the same in Sicily where all the mosques were demolished. Even in the last century the same practice was adopted in Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya and many other parts of the world.

Islam condemns and rejects all forms of terror, killing without due process of law, injustice, corruption, tyranny and oppression. There is no justification for the usage of terms such as 'Islamic terrorists'. As a Muslim we must take account of our deeds by other Muslims on the name of Islam. **I feel ashamed when I hear that Muslims are breaking the Law of Islam. I sincerely apologies to those who have suffered due to any senseless actions of so-called Muslims. I seek forgiveness from Allah for any mistake done and ask forgiveness from my fellow beings.** However, we must find the root causes of the challenges of Terrorism, hatred and hurt.

Diversity recognised, appreciated and celebrated:

Islam presents the concept that all human beings are equal and we are equal because we are all creatures of God with no distinctions of colour, race or country, or tribe or clan or anything else. One would find that fanaticism is generated in the last analysis either from any of these false prejudices, when you try to group humanity into certain watertight compartments. One cannot change the colour of his skin; one cannot change his place of birth. If one believes in any of these standards, then rational fusion of the human race is not possible and you become intolerant towards others.

In Islam, the rational fusion is possible for whatever tribe, you come from, from whatever race you come, whatever colour you may have, whatever territory You might be born in, whatever language you speak, you are one, you can be one. You belong to one race the human race, the one family the human family. You belong to one brotherhood. Diversity among fellow human beings must be recognised, appreciated and valued in all aspects of life. The majority community is always judged by the way it treats its minority community

Ends cannot justify means:

Another point is that Islam is very unique and firm in asserting that the ends cannot justify the means. The source from where fanaticism and intolerance have most often come from is the mistaken belief that the ends justify the means. This means that to achieve even good ends you can resort to evil means. The principle that Islam has enunciated is that **"Good and bad are not equal. Replace evil by good". (The Qur'an 41:34)**

If you fight falsehood with falsehood it is falsehood that prevails. If you replace vice with vice, it is vice which triumphs. If you change evil by evil, it is evil which is victorious. Islam says that evil is to be eliminated by good. If you pursue this technique then you would only be able to fill the earth with goodness, justice, peace and feeling for humanity. Islam has struck at the roots of fanaticism. If you reflect upon the system that Islam has given, you would find that fanaticism has no place in it and that idealism is the lifeblood of it. In the Qur'an it has been mentioned that the mission for which this Muslim nation has been created is that you call people to goodness. As far as the wrong (**munkar**) is concerned, you are permitted to eliminate it. But as far as the truth and virtue (**ma'ruf**) is concerned, it is not to be enforced by power.

One can very easily see that Islam has clearly discriminated between idealism and fanaticism. It has done everything to generate in us a real, noble, virtuous idealism, and to protect us from the evil influences of fanaticism. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has said that Islam is a religion of the middle path.

The Qur'an has called the Muslim nation '**Ummat al-Wusta**', the people of the middle and model nation, the people who maintain balance and equilibrium in all their affairs. Adhering to idealism, protecting and avoiding the extremes of fanaticism - this is the middle path and it is this path which Islam invites to all humanity. Through education, diplomacy, dialogue and firmness Muslims are urged to deal with extremism and fanaticism in the world.

We are dealing with here is a very serious problem of hatred, fear and prejudice. Those people who were responsible for killing thousands of people in America in what was clearly a carefully planned and expertly executed operation must be brought to justice. However, deep-rooted hatred can only be fought with dignity, education, understanding, dialogue and diplomacy. Unless the roots of hate are addressed there will be irrational people who will continue to commit such heinous evil crimes against humanity. Let all sensible people stand for peace, justice and make concerted efforts to fight terrorism by eliminating all injustices and exploitations in their part of world. I believe that being tough on the causes of this evil act is as important as identifying the terrorists themselves. I believe that without a revival of moral values, nurturing a shared sense of forgiveness and understanding may be we face an even greater challenge. We must pray to overcome hatred and violence in ourselves. Let us rededicate ourselves to peace, human dignity, and the eradication of the injustices that breed

rage and vengeance. It requires multi-religious co-operation of all decent people from all shades and all sections of our communities from all over the globe.

Global Ethics and Interfaith Dialogue:

I am reminded of the words of Professor Hans Kung “**No peace among nations without peace among the religions and no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions**”. I add “**No peace without Justice and no Justice without forgiveness and compassion**”. Dialogue and agreement must be conscientiously applied and maintained, so to create bonds of love, care, trust and confidence. Its prerequisite is proper education and learning from one another. We must speak and act truthfully with compassion. We must treat others as we wish others to treat us. Every human being must be treated, fairly, humanly and with dignity without any fear or discrimination. A group of concerned Muslims and non-Muslims on the invitation of Prince Hassan Bin Talal, Professor Rajmohan Gandhi and Dr Cornelio Sommaruga met in Caux on 26-29 July 2002 at Mountain House, Caux (Switzerland). **Please see The Caux Dialogue: Peace, Justice and Faith: An honest conversation. See www.caux.ch**

I admire the work of **Prince Hassan El Talal** over the years for promoting better understanding between different faiths and advocating dialogue for resolving conflicts. His short book “**Continuity, innovation and Change**” is a *must* read . I not only share his vision but also say that he represents true Islamic scholarship in the current debate on the issue of World peace. The building of peace requires an attitude of sanctity and reverence of life, freedom and justice, the eradication of poverty, dissolution of all forms of discrimination and the protection of the environment for personal and future generations. The ideals of peace include fundamental and global directives such as:

- *Do not kill i.e. have respect for life;**
- *Do not steal i.e. deal honestly and fairly;**
- *Do not lie i.e. speak and act truthfully;**
- *Do not commit sexual immorality i.e. respect and love one another.**

I confirm that Islam is faith of moderation and girder of unity for all mankind and blessing for mankind because Muslim model communities where:

- *All of God’s creation – whether human, animal or the environment – is valued and respected;**
- *Where people want more to serve others than to get what they can for themselves;**
- *Where no one has too little or too much;**
- *Respecting the right of others to disagree with us;**
- *Being sensitive and courteous to all.**

I affirm that in Islam the belief in God or the Divine is the bedrock of one’s faith out of which flows ideas on the meaning and purpose of life, on the unity and dignity of mankind. Human dignity thus is an acknowledgement of the divine presence in each and every one of us and unites us into a single family. We believe in “**Thinking globally but acting locally.**” The world will not change for the better unless the conscience of individuals is changed first.

The world’s Religious view:

Plurality is a fact of today’s global village. People from many different faiths and belief or

no faith live side by side. But society can only be built on mutual respect, openness and trust. This means living our lives with integrity, and allowing others to do so too. Our different religious traditions teach us the importance of good relationships characterized by honesty, truth, love, unselfishness, compassion and generosity of care for resolving conflicts by peaceful means.

Better understanding of others require us to share our desire for peace-building based on reverence of life, freedom, and justice, the eradication of poverty, dissolution of all forms of discrimination and protection of the environment for future generations.

We should show each other respect and courtesy. In dealing with people of other faiths and beliefs, or no convictions of any faith, this means:

- **Respecting other people’s freedom within the law to express their beliefs and convictions;**
- **Learning to understand what others actually believe and value, and letting them express this on their own terms;**
- **Valuing and respecting the convictions of others about food, dress, and social etiquette and not behaving in ways which cause needless offence;**
- **Recognizing that all of us at times fall short of the ideals of our own traditions and never comparing our own ideals with other people’s practices;**
- **Working together to prevent disagreement from leading to conflict;**
- **Always seeking to avoid violence in our relationship.**

Common Core Shared Human Values:

Honesty and sincerity, love and compassion, dignity and mutual respect, modesty and humility, moderation and restraint in our actions, sacrifice and unselfishness, kindness and courtesy, a sense of justice and a sense of fairness, a sense of balance and a sense of propriety, seeking forgiveness and asking for apology for past mistakes – these are values which all religions cherish.

When we talk about matters of faith and society with one another, we need to do so with sensitivity, honesty and straightforwardness. This means:

- **Recognising that listening carefully with respect, as well as speaking, is necessary for a genuine and honest conversation;**
- **Being honest about our beliefs and religious allegiances in bringing people together, not in confrontation but in trust to tackle urgent needs of the community;**
- **Not misrepresenting or disparaging other people’s beliefs and practices;**
- **Correcting misunderstandings or misrepresentations not only of our own but also of other faiths whenever we come across them;**
- **Being straightforward about our intentions in searching for solutions, focusing on *what* is right rather than *who* is right;**
- **Accepting and valuing the God-given diversity of our human family,**

honouring each person, appealing to the best qualities in everyone, and refusing to stereotype others;

- **Ensuring that all religious commitments of all those who are present in any interfaith meetings will be respected;**
- **Recognising that energy for change requires a moral and spiritual transformation in each human spirit.**

All of us want others to understand and respect our personal views. Some people will also want to persuade others to join their faith. In a multi faith society where this is permitted, the attempt should always be characterized by self-restraint and concern for the other's freedom and dignity. This means:

- **Respecting another person's expressed wish to be left alone;**
- **Avoiding imposing ourselves and our views on individuals or communities who are in vulnerable situations;**
- **Always being sensitive and courteous;**
- **Avoiding violent actions or language, threats, manipulation, improper inducements, or the misuse of any kind of power;**
- **Respecting the right of others to disagree with us;**
- **Building lasting relationship outside our comfort zones.**

Together we will share our lives and resources that God has given us to make our earth a trusting community of hope, security and opportunity for all. Let us pray, **"Let there be respect for the earth, peace for its people, love in our lives, delight in the good, forgiveness for our past wrongs and from now on a new start"**. Amen

***A speech delivered at "Faith in Communities" Conference organised by London Borough Bartnet on Tuesday 16 September 2003 at North London Business Park, Oakleigh Road South, London N11 1NP**