

“The Role of religion and Belief in a democratic Society: Searching for ways to combat Terrorism and Extremism”

A paper presented by Dr Abduljalil Sajid at The OSCE International Conference, Gulistan Palace, Baku, Azerbaijan, 10th & 11th October 2002

I am honoured -- and deeply humbled -- to be invited to speak to you this afternoon on the very important and timely topic of the role of religion in the response to terrorism. From the very outset I wish to give you greetings from the British Muslim community and their representative body Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) , congratulating you for organising this conference I quote from the message of Mr Iqbal Sacranie the Secretary General of MCB: “I am pleased to learn from MCB Central Working Committee member Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid that he will be attending as an invitee of the British Foreign Commonwealth Office and contributing to this timely conference on “The Role of Religion and Belief in a Democratic Society: searching ways to Combat terrorism”

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is a national umbrella organisation that serves and represents British Muslims by sharing in the common good of our society as a whole. The MCB works with a number of government forums such as the Inner Cities Religious Council and the Race Relations Forum and many other major faith communities to promote the well being of all. Cultural diversity and religious pluralism inspire healthy competition between communities and nations, and God enjoins us to direct that competition towards the seeking of the common good for all humanity. Co-operation and Solidarity among the faiths means that competing human communities strive to understand and reach out to one another in pursuit of a united human ethic and vision.

The Muslim Council of Britain condemns violence and terror of all kinds, as there is no justification for senseless and extra judicial killing. Terrorism is an evil and destructive phenomenon that inflicts pain and suffering on defenceless people. Those who planned and perpetrated those atrocities, regardless of their religious, ideological or political beliefs, stand outside the pale of human values. Islam commands us to be just and wrong no one.

To eradicate terrorism it is imperative that we address the conditions that can give rise it. To combat terrorism effectively we need a united front against terror. Building bridges between nations and peoples must be an integral part of that strategy. Sadly, the world is instead being pushed towards more violence and division. Instead of vengeance we need justice and instead of rhetoric we need reason. We must deny terrorists the opportunities to exploit the social, economic and political problems that continue to blight our world.

The real and long-term answer to the evil of terrorism is to give people their due stake both in the resources and the affairs of their world. The Muslim Council reiterates its own commitment to the way of peace and pro-existence in its quest for the common good of all. On behalf of the Muslim Council of Britain I wish you every success with your conference and look forward to receiving a full report from Imam Abduljalil Sajid.”

Let me begin from the very outset to clarify Islam from Muslim. Most people treat Islam and Muslims as synonymous and mutually interchangeable terms, often saying Islam where

they ought to say Muslims and vice versa. In my opinion the word “Islam” should be used exclusively for the “Way of Life” based upon divine sources: The Book known as Qur’an, “the word of God” and Sunnah, “the proven practices of the Prophet” (peace and blessing of God be upon him). “Muslims” as human beings are free to abide or deviate from Divine Guidance, as they feel fit according to their own conscience. Islam never claimed to be a new faith. It is the same faith, which God ordained with the creation of the first man sent to earth. Islam confirms almost all Biblical and Hebrew Prophets as the Prophets of Islam and their messages as the messages of Islam as long it is confirmed in the Qur’an the Book of Islam. The moral and ethical code of Islam is similar to Judaism, Christianity and many other major world faiths. The only difference is in theology, concepts and practices in method of worship of the One and the Only One God and methodology how the morality and ethics should govern all spheres and aspects of our human life.

ISLAM: Din, Dunya and Dawla

The general theory of an Islam begins with a consideration of application of Islamic Shariah (Law) in daily life. According to Islamic teachings, the Creator not only laid down laws governing the natural universe but rules for human conduct in all aspects of life. Unlike natural order, which follows its predetermined laws, mankind has the freedom to rebel and follow its own “man-made” laws, which is, however, a form of unbelief (shirk). Non-submission to the will of Allah is not only an act of ingratitude (kufr) for divine mercies, but also a choice for evil and misery in this world and punishment in the life hereafter. In Islam, all aspects of natural life have been God-willed, therefore, the ultimate purpose of all creation are the compliance of the created with the will of the creator.

Islamic way of life can be summarised in three words 1) Din (religion), 2) Dunya (Community), 3) Dawla (State). Islamic Shariah covers all of these three aspects. From Islamic point of view, life is a unity. It cannot be divided into watertight compartments. Islamic Shariah gives directions to all aspects of life in its entirety. Islamic Shariah is a complete scheme of life and an all-embracing social order where nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking. Therefore there is no separation between state and church. Secularism, in Muslims view, destroys the transcendence of all moral values. In Qur’anic words “those who forget God eventually forget themselves” (59:19) and their individual and corporate personalities disintegrate.

Muslims are required to observe religious rules in the community and establish Islamic State to achieve man’s righteousness. It is the duty of every Muslim to cooperate with others for seeking common good. It is the duty of Islamic state to establish a just social order based on principles of harmony, respect, freedom and dignity where all human beings are accepted with all of their differences. Diversity is not only recognised but also appreciated in Islamic Society. Muslims can discharge this responsibility collectively with establishing an Islamic State with power to command (amr) and prohibit (nahy). Thus Islamic State is an indispensable condition of Islamic life in the true sense of the word “Islam”.

Religion: Bridge building or Erecting Walls?

Religion as a social force can be harnessed to build bridges or manipulated to erect walls. How religion functions in the society depend upon a number of factors, among them, the

political, economic and cultural environment in which the particular religion operates. 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 transcend one's own religious boundaries. We should eliminate forever such religious exclusivist.

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 today we have, for the first time in history, the opportunity 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 deed such as charitable work and encourages to do 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.

Islamic Democratic roots

In the Muslim world, the relationship between religion and politics has not been articulated in clear and unambiguous terms, but is still a matter of experimentation and debate. Historically, Muslim political order was established by a community that rejected the idea of conferring any religious status on the head of the state and political authorities. Political succession was based on a notion of choice (ikhtiyar), but this was later transformed into a de facto domination by powerful clans beginning with the Umayyads. This prompted Muslim scholars to limit state power to the realm of defence and maintaining intercommunal order, and to limit legislative authority within juristic confines, away from the dictates of the state. There is dire need of modern political practices and institutions in the Muslim world. Democracy, constitutionalism, and the rule of law are no more than a show, a political façade in most Muslim societies. The roots of the problem can better be understood when one realises that modern political structures are superimposed on an intrinsically traditional political culture.

There is a dire need to evolve a new understanding of how religion and moral standards relate to the public sphere form within the Muslim experience, instead of relying on notions borrowed from the historical West and superimposed on society. The western world, which continues to experience an erosion of the moral and transcendental core of its social life, stands, on the other hand, to learn a great deal by opening itself to the remarkably different mode of interplay between religion and public life in the world of Islam.

Islam is essential for the development of a better future for human society because its adherents constitute one-fifth of world population. No democratic order can be achieved or maintained by discarding the aspirations and ethos of one-fifth of world population. Yet Islam is an essential partner for developing a democratic and peaceful world for more basic reason. Islam holds in high esteem the most fundamental values that make a democratic and pluralist society possible, namely equality, freedom, justice, and interracial and interreligious solidarity and co-operation. The emphasis Islam places on the values of equality, freedom, justice, and pluralism is manifested in the Islamic scripture—the Qur'an, in the practices of the Prophet of Islam and those of his companions, in the historical experience of Muslim society, and in ethos of the contemporary Islamic reform movements.

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 Muslims and non-Muslims 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 religious communities. This common ground is expressed as a mutual respect of the freedom and autonomy of different religious communities. That none should appropriate to themselves 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, more often than not rose out of human excesses and the desire to stir religious passion to support political goals. It is true that the two religions 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 the two religions than between them. Muslims 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.

A Muslim who commits a serious crime or murders a non-Muslim for monetary gains or any reason deserves to receive a just punishment, and a non-Muslim who save life deserves a praise and admiration. Reaction of Christians and Jews to these acts would be no difference. One ought to condemn wrong doings and support good deeds, regardless of the identity of the actor. Hence, action rather than religious affiliation should determine the social worth of people. The question of global peace in a multicultural, multi-religious world is ultimately a question of shifting the locus of social evaluation and order from doctrine to value. Since complete secularism has led to the erosion of morality and the rise of nihilism, religious commitment is becoming increasingly central to public life.

The views they express today, and teach in public, and in shari'a departments of traditional Islamic colleges, would have been sufficient for them to be branded as heretics just a century ago. Leading scholars of the Azhar University, such as Muhammad Abu Zahra, Mahmoud Shaloot, Muhammad al-Ghazali, and Yusuf al-Qardawi, have been emphasizing equality between men and women, and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

COMBATING TERRORISM

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 shock waves 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.

Terrorism and Islam:

There is no accepted definition of "Terrorism" by any international organisation. The present usage of the word "Terrorism" means the unlawful use of force or violence against

persons or property, to intimidate or coerce civilian population undermining the civil authority, excluding acts perpetrated by states or by coalitions of states. A definition of terrorism from an Islamic perspective might well be more wide-ranging than current usage.

The Islamic Scholars (IMAMS and Ulema) of Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) in their meeting on Saturday the 29th September 2001 suggested that Terrorism include:

“Indiscriminate murder and the shedding of blood without due process of law, driving people out of their homes and lands, destruction of crops and livestock, the spreading of Fasad or Fitna (destruction, chaos, mischief and corruption which encompasses political, economic, social and moral corruption) on earth - are examples of criminal acts and evil behaviour condemned by Islam.”...to spread mischief and corruption on earth and destroy crops and cattle. God does not like mischief and corruption. (2: 25). (For full text see www.mcb.org.uk)

Islam and terrorism are contradictory terms opposed to each other. 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 apologize 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 cause of the problem.

Terrorism, in fact, is systematic, premeditated and calculated. It spans vast aspects covering the entire world, and manifests itself in various forms and shapes. Sometimes the religion of Islam is held responsible for the acts of a handful Muslims who are associated with acts of destruction and terror. Islam whose name means peace cannot encourage its adherents to work for death and destruction. It is an irony of our time that the light of Islamic learning, which brought an end to the dark ages of the West, is now being seen as responsible for the advent of an age of terror. Islam is peace not terror.

The efforts to blame Islam for terrorism are not only baseless and erroneous, but are unmistakably malicious and ill intended. Islam, like many religious traditions, stresses charity, mercy, and compassion. Historically, Islam is recognized for its tolerance toward other religions, even when bigotry and intolerance were widely accepted and practiced in medieval times. But like other religious traditions, Islam recognizes the right of peoples to fight aggression, even though it puts higher premium on forgiveness. Reciprocity, or eye for an eye, is found not only in Islam, but in Christianity and Judaism as well. Further, like other religions, Islamic texts contain statements that emphasize forgiveness and peace, along with others that permit the use of force for fighting back against aggression and for achieving just peace.

In Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah, Moses narrates to the Israelites a fiery message from God as they prepare to enter the promised land: “I will make mine arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh; and that with the blood of the slain and of the captives, from the beginning of revenges upon the enemy.” Likewise, the Gospels contain texts that call for the use of force to avenge the rights of people and to punish the unjust. In the Gospel of Matthew, a statement attributed to Jesus reads: “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but the sword.”

A partial and out-of-context reading of religious texts, combined with a desire to reciprocate against real or perceived injustice, may lead misguided individuals and radical groups to commit atrocities in the name of religion and justice. Muslim scholars and leaders must speak against using Islam and Islamic doctrines to undertake acts rooted in political ambition or frustration. By the same token, media organizations have the duty to present a balanced picture of Muslim society and faith, rather than feeding on the frenzy of bigotry and stereotyping. The media more often than not focuses on the eccentric and extraordinary, and as such brings distorted pictures of Middle Eastern realities. Rather than showing that radical Islamic groups standing on the fringe outside mainstream society, the media reverse the picture by projecting radicalism and extremism as the norm in the Middle East. The sight of a handful of Palestinian youths celebrating an American calamity is newsworthy, but a demonstration by thousands of sympathetic Arabs is not.

Religious Extremism:

Islam is religion of moderation. Holy Qur'an defines Muslims as the well-balanced middle nation model for others (2:143) and advised them not to follow extremism in religious interpretation (4:171, 5:77, 22:78). The Holy Prophet warned Muslims: "Beware of Extremism in your religion as people before you were destroyed themselves because of their extremism", "Do not be hard upon yourself in your opinion in the matter of faith", "Always choose easy way in your religious way on matters of faith. Certainly religion is easy" (Collection of sayings of the Holy Prophet by Ahmed, Nisai, Al-Hakim and Ibne Maja). In my humble opinion Islam believes in a civil Society based on rule of law, anyone who creates chaos (Fitna or Fasad) in the society through terror can be treated as harabi (waging war against the society) and should be brought to justice accordingly by legal process. Islam and terrorism are contradictory terms opposed to each other. 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'. The Holy prophet of Islam said, "By God, he is not a true believer, from whose mischief his neighbours do not feel secure." (Bukhari, Muslim)

Sanctity of life:

One of the distinctive features of the present world is the overwhelming presence of violence in our societies. The nature of indiscriminate and senseless violence is considered one of the prime threats to the world peace and security. I must make it clear that Islam upholds sanctity of human life, as the Holy Qur'an declares that killing one innocent human being is like killing the entire human race (5:32, 6:151, 17:33), like all other faith traditions. Islam considers all life forms as sacred. The first and foremost basic right of a human being given by God is the right to live in peace and security. However, taking a criminal's life by the state in order to administer justice is allowed in Islam as it upholds the rule of law, and helps maintain peace and security of the society. Only a proper and competent court can decide whether an individual has forfeited his right to life by disregarding the right to life and peace of other human beings. The accused must be given full facilities under the law 'the right of defence'. Extra judicial killings are strictly prohibited in Islam.

Suicide killing:

Killing one's own self (suicide) is prohibited in Islam (4:29), as it is an abuse of the Divine gift of Life. According to Islamic Law those who commit or try to commit suicide are committing a major sin and will be sent to the fire of hell. Even patients who are in severe pain are prohibited to wish death. Holy Prophet said: "Do not harm yourself or injure others". : The holy book of Islam does not call on young volunteers to strap explosives to their bodies and set them off in crowded public areas in Israel. That much is clear. Suicide bombers are waging a distinctly modern type of warfare not sanctioned in any faith. Many Muslim clerics and scholars have criticized the theology of suicide bombers, and the practice is very controversial within Islam. In the past year alone, the supreme religious leader and Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah al Sheikh, said he feared that using explosives in this manner is a form of suicide, and therefore condemned. And an influential Sheikh Al-Azhar Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, said bombers who detonate explosives among civilians are not fighting a true war and cannot be considered martyrs. These voices are not often heard because the Muslim community is united in the moral righteousness of the Palestinian cause. Let me remind ourselves the Islamic position:

"Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that He will indeed reckon your deeds." From the last sermon of Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him).

"Hijacking Planes, terrorizing innocent people and shedding blood constitute a form of injustice that can not be tolerated by Islam, which views them as gross crimes and sinful acts."

Shaykh Abdul Aziz al-Al-shaikh, Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia and Chairman of the Senior Ulama, on September 15th, 2001

"The terrorists acts, from the perspective of Islamic law, constitute the crime of hirabah (waging war against society)."

September 27, 2001 - Fatwa, signed by Many scholars such as:

Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Grand Islamic Scholar and Chairman of the Sunnah and Sira Council, Qatar

Judge Tariq al-Bishri, First Deputy President of the Council of preachers, Egypt

Dr. Muhammad s. al-Awa, Professor of Islamic Law and Shari'a, Egypt

Dr. Haytham al-Khayyat, Islamic scholar, Syria

Shaykh Fahmi Houaydi, Islamic scholar, Syria

Shaykh Taha Jabir al-Alwani, Chairman, North America High Council

"Neither the law of Islam nor its ethical system justify such a crime."

Dr Zaki Badawi, Principal of the Muslim College in London. Cited in Arab News, September 28, 2001.

"It is wrong to kill innocent people. It is also wrong to praise those who kill innocent people." Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, Pakistan. Cited in the New York Times, September 28, 2001.

(The above statements by high ranking international Muslim scholars and leaders appeared in an advertisement placed by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, in the New York Times, October 17th, 2001 and reproduced in MCB book on 11 September "In Quest of Sanity")

Roots of Extremism and Fanaticism.

There are Muslims who claim to be religious but try to impose their views over others by force or violence. They forget that Islamic teaching advocates the fundamental principle to

respect for individual freedom of conscience and belief. Islam believes that freedom of belief is a basic God given right to all human beings. Extremism and Fanaticism is alien to Islam. However there are a few verses of the Holy Quran, which have been interpreted in such a way that some Muslim may take a view to impose their views over others. For example The Holy Qur'an commands Muslim to live and rule their lives according to the revealed message of God. If any Muslim does not decide according to the Holy Qur'an then he is not only wrongdoer, a rebel, disobedient but a non-believer also (5:44- 47). These verses were interpreted by some that if a Muslim ruler has completely abandon the Islamic Law then it is legitimate to disobey him and change him by force. They also believe that, as Islam does not make any distinction between communities of believers and the Islamic State - because the State is simply a political arm to establish common good, it is important that Islamic Law must be established within Islamic societies. Due to their political ends they establish effective ways to promote their views by every means available to them. In my opinion, fanaticism, terrorism and extremism are symptom of a problem, not the actual cause. In order to combat and eradicate these evils totally our long-term goal should be to eliminate the underlying social and political causes which breed them. We must continue fighting against Racism (colour or cultural), Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Xenophobia, and bigotry in words and deeds in all aspects of our society. Paralleling our actions against terrorism, we must have equally vigorous efforts to enhance freedom, human dignity, justice and humanitarian values. Some of the possible factors behind the violent terrorists acts may include:

- 1) Hatred, hurt and prejudice
- 2) Fear and powerlessness
- 3) Occupation and domination
- 4) Injustice and suffering
- 5) Corruption and greed
- 6) Oppression and Control
- 7) Dictatorship and total authority
- 8) Debt, poverty and hunger
- 9) Frustration and helplessness
- 10) Dislike of inclusive Society and above all
- 11) Discrimination and Islamophobia

There is a new type of terrorism, which has emerged recently in the forms of arson, bombing and sabotage in the name of saving the environment, ecology and animal and zoological kingdom. Racism (colour or cultural), anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Xenophobia, bigotry must be in words and deeds. I am glad to note that from the very beginning the British Prime Minister together with the American President made it clear that Islam and the Muslim Community are not to blame for the tragedy. We are dealing with fanatic individuals who have behaved in this most abhorrent and abominable manner. This is not a crusade or conflict between Islam and the West. Rt Hon Tony Blair said: "Blaming Islam is as ludicrous as blaming Christianity for loyalist attack on Catholics or nationalists attack on Protestants in Northern Ireland".

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 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. A source from where fanaticism and intolerance have most often come is the mistaken belief that ends justify means. This means that to achieve even good ends you could resort to evil means. The principle that Islam has enunciated is that

"Good and bad are not equal. Replace evil by good". (Holy Quran 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 only you would be able to fill the earth with goodness, and justice, and peace and fellow feeling. 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 but 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.

You can very easily see that Islam has clearly discriminated between idealism and fanaticism. It has done everything to generate in us real idealism, noble idealism, 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.

What 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. I have given some good practices of bridge-building from various International Interfaith organisations, three faith forums and interfaith network as the end of this paper as Apeendix.

Global Ethics and Interfaith Dialogue

I am reminded 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.

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 must read for every Muslim. 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.

We 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.

We should pledge to increase our awareness by positive thinking in understanding one another. We must pledge to be courageous defenders of peaceful teachings and interpretations of Islam, and to be exemplary peacemakers in our personal, family and social conduct of our lives in order to socially beneficial, peace fostering, bridge-builder and nature-friendly way of life.

Remember, Remember. Remember. Evil is not in the body. Evil is in the mind, therefore harm nobody. Just change the mind.

Lord You said and your word is true! Love is stronger than hate. O God Almighty You are peace and from You peace comes. Bestow upon all of us Your peace and make our final destiny in your eternal abode of peace. Let there be respect for the earth, peace for is people, love in our lives, and delight in the good, forgiveness for our past wrongs and from now on a new start.

Appendix

Full message of MCB Secretary General to the OSCE International Conference, Gulistan Palace, Baku, Azerbaijan, 10th & 11th October 2002

From: Iqbal Sacranie,
Secretary General, The Muslim Council of Britain

To:

I am pleased to learn from MCB Central Working Committee member Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid that he will be attending as an invitee of the British Foreign Commonwealth Office and contributing to this timely conference on "The Role of Religion and Belief in a Democratic Society: searching ways to Combat terrorism"

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is a national umbrella organisation that serves and represents British Muslims by sharing in the common good of our society as a whole. The MCB works with a number of government forums such as the Inner Cities Religious Council and the Race Relations Forum and many other major faith communities to promote the well being of all. Cultural diversity and religious pluralism inspire healthy competition between communities and nations, and God enjoins us to direct that competition towards the seeking of the common good for all humanity. Co-operation and Solidarity among the faiths means that competing human communities strive to understand and reach out to one another in pursuit of a united human ethic and vision.

The Muslim Council of Britain condemns violence and terror of all kinds, as there is no justification for senseless and extra judicial killing. Terrorism is an evil and destructive phenomenon that inflicts pain and suffering on defenceless people. Those who planned and perpetrated those atrocities, regardless of their religious, ideological or political beliefs, stand outside the pale of human values. Islam commands us to be just and wrong no one.

To eradicate terrorism it is imperative that we address the conditions that can give rise it. To combat terrorism effectively we need a united front against terror. Building bridges between nations and peoples must be an integral part of that strategy. Sadly, the world is instead being pushed towards more violence and division. Instead of vengeance we need justice and instead of rhetoric we need reason. We must deny terrorists the opportunities to exploit the social, economic and political problems that continue to blight our world.

The real and long-term answer to the evil of terrorism is to give people their due stake both in the resources and the affairs of their world. The Muslim Council reiterates its own commitment to the way of peace and pro-existence in its quest for the common good of all. On behalf of the Muslim Council of Britain I wish you every success with your conference and look forward to receiving a full report from Imam Abduljalil Sajid

Iqbal Sacranie
Secretary General

The Muslim Council of Britain