

“So That You May Know One Another”
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Ladies and Gentlemen, Rabbi Ehud Bandel, Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, and Dr. Deborah Weissman

I would like to thank ICCJ for their invitation to speak to you on this occasion and congratulate you on your decision to meet for the first time in a Muslim country.

The portion of the Quranic verse, which has been selected as a theme of the conference, in its entirety reads:

"O Mankind, We created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know one another. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous of you" (Quran 49:13).

In this brief verse, Islamic scholars have been able to draw several fundamental Islamic principles which are reaffirmed elsewhere in the Quran and the Prophet’s teachings:

- God addresses all of humanity, not only the Muslims.
- God says that He created us from one man and one woman, thus making us all brothers and sisters.
- The verse invalidates the claims of superiority due to one’s birth by stating that all are born through a similar process, i.e. from a male and female.
- God is the One who made human beings as part of tribes and nations as a means of identifying and differentiating. This is not meant to be a source of superiority or inferiority, nor as a contributing component of tribalism, caste systems, nationalisms, colonialism or racism.
- The only measure of greatness among human beings is at the individual level, not on a national or group level, based on the characteristic called “Taqwa” in Arabic. This word means God-consciousness.
- This singular criterion of preference, Taqwa, however, is not quite measurable by other human beings since it deals with the inner self. Therefore, human beings must leave even this criterion to God to decide rather than using it to judge each other. At the same time though, this principle does not mean that we are unable to differentiate between right and wrong behavior, nor does it prevent us from acting against wrong actions. Rather, it discourages the human tendency to ‘sit in judgment’ of others.

Elsewhere in the Quran, God asserts that He created all people as one people (one Ummah) and it is human beings who created divisions within themselves. (Quran 10:19).

In terms of religious plurality, the Quran says "...To each among you have we prescribed a law (Sharia) and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you followers of one faith. But He willed otherwise to test you in what He has given you; therefore strive to excel one another in all virtues. Ultimately you all shall return to God; then He will show you the truth of those matters in which you dispute" (Quran 5:48).

This understanding of how human beings were created, as well as why humans are different, is built into the faith structure of Islam.

We believe that there is only One God who created all. We are asked to believe in all of the Prophets, not just Biblical Prophets but all. We are also asked not to prefer one Prophet above others in terms of respect. We are asked to believe in the earlier scriptures despite God's criticism of people for changing those scriptures (Quran 2:285).

Any Muslim who does not believe in the whole set of these principles is not considered a believer by God (Quran 4: 136).

These principles are also a part of the value system taught to Muslims by the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. In Islam, therefore, relationships, rights, and duties toward one's neighbors are not limited to Muslims. There are four types of neighbors mentioned in the Quran (4:36) and they can be of any faith with no difference in rights and duties.

These principles are also a part of an Islamic social structure: justice and fairness, upholding the rights of the poor, as well as charity to those in need, extend to all people without any differentiation between a Muslim and a non-Muslim.

In Madinah, the city in which the Prophet established peace between various tribal and faith groups, he negotiated and implemented a written constitution. This relatively modern term, "constitution", is how Dr. Muhammad Hameedullah refers to this document in his book "The First Written Constitution in the World". Classical Islamic literature refers to it in Arabic as "waseeqatun Nabi" or "Saheefah" (treaty or covenant).

What is significant about this document is that after stating the equal religious and legal rights of each of the Jewish and pagan tribes of Madinah, this document repeatedly uses the phrase "one Ummah with the believers." This constitution implemented the Quranic principle a "plurality of religions" as well as other variations among people, while keeping in mind the "oneness of humanity", and offering "equal security", mutual defense, legal and civic autonomy and freedom of religion to all citizens.

These are Islamic ideals that Muslims the world over learn of through sermons, Imams, teachers and mothers, who still inspire one to live by these ideals. This is what 150 leading Islamic scholars asserted in the document known as "A Common Word."

With the scriptural, structural, and systemic enshrining of the ideal of the oneness of humanity, along with the simultaneous recognition of religious pluralism, Muslims have challenged themselves throughout history to live up to these principles, sometimes more successfully than others. Unfortunately, these ideals have been abandoned all together at times, as in many other human efforts.

The struggle to practically implement these principles was evident even in the Prophet's life.

There are many Hadith, or teachings of the Prophet, quoting from his sermons, which repeatedly strike at Arab pride, pride in ancestry, and ill treatment of the other.

The Prophet realized the challenges of preaching the message of unity of humankind. Even in his farewell sermon shortly before his death, he made it a point to address this issue:

"O people, remember that your Lord is One. All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black, nor [does] a black has any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action. Indeed, the noblest among you is the one with the best character (Taqwa).

It was through the systemic incorporation of the concept of mutual humanity and religious pluralism into Scripture, belief structures, laws and values that explains why Islamic societies, from the start, were racially diverse, multi-ethnic, and open to other faith communities. Whether it is Madinah, Baghdad, Andalus, Egypt, Timbuktu, Jerusalem, Istanbul, Bukhara or Delhi, one finds people of different races and religions living and working comfortably with each other by and large. Of course, we can find numerous occasions when, as I said earlier, the ideals have been circumvented or forgotten.

Rose Wilder Lane of "Little House on the Prairie" fame also known as an important libertarian philosopher, as a result of her book "Discovery of Freedom." She asserts that Prophet Muhammad was the second most important sources of assertions of freedom in the world. This audience might enjoy reading her assertion about the first source of freedom as Prophet Abraham and Americans among us might note her assertion that the American Revolution was the third most important source of freedom in the world.

Although her reading of the Prophet's contribution and Islamic civilization might be difficult for some to stomach in today's Islamophobic environment, it is one which most Muslims continue to remember to inspire them in their efforts to make the world a more just place of human habitation without religious and racial animus.

Rose Wilder Lane came to these conclusions about 70 years ago when most of the Muslim world was still under colonial occupation. It was during these times that the ideals of Islam faced some of their major challenges.

Faced with the triple whammy of colonial occupation, cultural hegemony, and forced modernization, Muslims started reacting to events defensively instead of continuing to serve humanity at large and develop at their own rate of progress. Progress, which they helped define for a thousand years with their contributions to world civilization, which was open to all faiths and communities.

Muslims, however, cannot claim that they have always lived these ideals individually or collectively. Unfortunately, there are many examples, which show Muslims living way below their own ideals. We must consider ourselves individually responsible for our personal neglect and collectively, for the transgressions of other human beings – their basic right to healthy and productive lives.

However, it is not the personal or collective transgression of the ideals, which concerns us at this moment but the challenges to the very existence of these ideals themselves.

Some Muslims in the colonial era started defining themselves as people who are not open to others while defending themselves against foreign occupiers.

A number of Muslims started formulating new and sometimes contradictory ideas to the fundamental tenets of Islam. Their products continue to inform and shape some Muslim behavior today. In many of these ideologies, the Muslim Ummah was defined more within the confines of various forms of nationalism that gave more importance to the divisions of language, heredity, region, race, and religion or tribalism than to the Islamic ideal of one humanity, despite difference.

It is not just Turkish nationalism, Arab Nationalism or Indian nationalism, but the understanding of the formulation of “Ummah” that also gradually became more nationalistic. This understanding emphasized exclusion rather than inclusion. While Rumi, *alif lailah*, and the rest of Muslim classics depict the neighborhoods in the Muslim world as a large cosmopolitan culture in which ‘others’ are regular participants as neighbors, scholars, partners, heroes as well as villains, post-colonial Muslim thought defined itself with exclusive linguistic or racial boundaries and a demand for physical borders.

Nationalism in the Muslim world, unfortunately, also revived tribalism, which further worked against the inclusive cosmopolitan principles demanded by the ideals of mutual humanity and religious pluralism. This is where the challenges facing ethnic minorities become more pronounced.

Whereas nationalism and tribalism have created substantial challenges for ethnic groups, faith minorities today suffer at the hands of the exclusivist religio-nationalists in the Muslim world. These are people who consider the term “Ummah” to be a modern day equivalent of the term “nation.”

Interestingly enough, Professor Robert Pape's thesis in his book *Dying to Win*, reached the same conclusion: that suicide bombing is not a religious phenomena. He described the taproot of modern terrorism as nationalism, writing that it is "an extreme strategy for national liberation."

These religio-nationalists are not the universalists of Islam, they are its exclusivists. A non-Muslim group or a Muslim group that does not fit within their understanding of faith are judged as Kafirs, who then, God forbid, should be eliminated as soon as they can find the time or opportunity to do it.

This theology has nothing to do with Prophet Muhammad's constitution of Madinah, or the Quran's teachings of shared humanity and religious pluralism.

I call it the street theology of anger.

It is a street theology because it is neither developed by any established school of thought in Islam nor does it follow any methodology that has been developed based on Islam's primary sources, the Quran and Sunnah or example of the Prophet. These include *usool of fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), *usool of tafseer* (principles of exegesis) or *usool of hadith* (The Hadith methodology). All of these Islamic sciences limit the free form distortions of the Quran and the Prophet's life.

One of the most vociferous proponents of this ideology are the so-called Taliban. The Taliban, interestingly enough, do realize that they are not qualified graduates of any school, so they call themselves Taliban or students. I wish their humbleness in naming themselves had stopped them from their self-righteous ethnic and sectarian exclusion of minorities. [I personally consider Taliban to be "school drop-outs" then students and see a resemblance in their culture of the inner city school drop out culture.]

I would like to take a few moments to define this theology of anger. However, please do not expect me to make it coherent, since by nature it is not):

- Taliban leaders, as well as those of groups like Hizbut Tehreer, assert that Muslims cannot be friends with the Kafirs.
- These exclusivists also argue against the well-established Islamic terminology of the category of People of the Book (Jews and Christians). They say that today's People of the book are not the same as those referred to in the Quran. They are Mushriks (polytheists) and Kafirs, since they have strayed from the teachings in their Scriptures. Therefore, Muslims cannot have any special relationship with the Christians and Jews of today. [Compare this to Caliph Omar's inclusive interpretation of including Zoroastrian in the category of People of the Book.]
- They say the Frangi system has failed. Frangi is an Arabic term derived from the word "French," and was used by the Arabs to refer to the Crusaders. It has become a

word that defines foreigners in general even if they are British or Americans. According to the Taliban, Pakistan's laws are "Frangi laws."

- Unlike the wisdom of Baghdad's House of Wisdom in the ninth century, a powerhouse of knowledge and progress, which borrowed philosophies from everywhere, Greeks, Persians, and Indians, the exclusivist religio-nationalists do not accept the philosophies or experiences of others. They assert that democracy is a Frangi Kafir system. Public support for the Taliban in Pakistan substantially dropped when they heard a Pakistani Taliban leader, Sufi Muhammad, ranting about his ideology as described above in a live broadcast.

These are just a few examples of the many assertions by proponents of this theology of anger that has further turned away from the inclusive well-established Islamic ideals of shared humanity and religious coexistence.

Globalization unfortunately gives this street theology of anger some of the readily available tools of audiovisuals and internet. The intellectual exercise of writing papers and books requires a thoroughness that these street theologians do not have intellectual capacity for. However, the internet provides a great opportunity for tele-evangelism. One recent admission to this category is Anwar Al-Awlaki. He is a great storyteller who is now using the internet to recruit American Muslims for his version of the street theology of anger.

This theology is responsible for much of the fanatic excesses directed against non-Muslim citizens as well as Muslim religious and ethnic minorities.

It goes against the well-established Islamic principles of mutual humanity and religious pluralism:

- It is against the Prophet's life-long struggle to establish, order, justice and peace in society
- It disregards the Islamic principle that chaos (Fitna) is worse than murder
- It defies classical Islamic law's stands on war, peace, diplomacy and treaties

Very few Muslims subscribe to this "theology of anger" despite the fact that its ideologues try to align themselves with the common Muslim feelings of solidarity with the Iraqis, Afghans and Palestinians and sympathy with 15 million-plus Muslim refugees in the world today.

While reasons for this anger might be legitimate, the theology of anger is neither a theology nor it is Islamic.

Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, a South Asian Muslim reformer of the early 20th century asserted: "You must become a good human being before you can ever become a good Muslim".

God has told us “He had decreed Mercy for Himself”, *Kataba ala nafsihir Rehma* in the Quran (Quran 6:12).

But while God is Merciful, we still need to ask ourselves whether we are being as merciful as He is.

I beg for God’s Mercy. I seek His forgiveness for myself and for my neighbors.

Faith is about interconnectedness. Not just between an individual and God, but also between others and ourselves.

There is a small chapter at the end of the Quran called Small Kindnesses. In it, God describes the person who has lost interconnectedness with others, and in turn has lost his faith. God says:

"Have you ever seen a person who contradicts the faith in God and His Judgment? That is the person who pushes the orphan aside and does not promote feeding the poor. (Quran 107)

Connecting with God and serving His Creation are, therefore, twin pillars of faith as we all know.

Today, more than ever, people of faith must implement the tradition of interconnectedness on a much broader level. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, reminded us that we cannot be good people of faith if our neighbor goes hungry while we eat our fill. In today’s global village, the neighborhood has expanded.

It is in this global village where interfaith dialogue is most crucial.

The Parliament is the mother of the interfaith dialogue tradition, if mothers and fathers of other dialogues can tolerate my saying so.

At the Parliament we divide dialogue into three parts:

1. Faith
2. Interfaith
3. Engagement

When Believers share their faith directly with others, it strengthens mutual human connectedness and allows people to understand others beyond the popular stereotyping or the electronic noise generated by today’s media. The parliament is very particular about providing this opportunity at the highest level of inclusiveness.

Interfaith in the parliament is in essence about sharing one’s experience of the other with that other. We devote almost one-third time of the Parliament to this aspect of dialogue.

Engagement is the Parliament's opportunity to get faith communities and peoples of different faiths to come together to work on a common cause.

Many participants actually become activists through this process and end up committing more strongly to their own faith. Some devise their own faith-based arguments to enhance understanding and activism of the other.

In Chicago, the Muslim community was launched into interfaith relationships in a major way with the Parliament of 1993. Its dynamism forced our Imams to rearticulate Islamic teachings about the meaning of a mutual humanity and religious pluralism in their sermons, refreshing the lessons of the Islamic heritage.

The resulting relationships continued not only in the shape of multiple dialogues but more importantly, resulted in various engagements for the common good. Today, Muslims are active members in Chicago of coalitions such as those against local police torture of citizens, upholding the rights of undocumented workers, the interfaith coalition for justice and peace in Israel and Palestine, and many other hunger, homelessness, human rights and civil rights-oriented coalitions. None of these coalitions existed before the 1993 Parliament.

In the United States the main expression of civic engagement of Muslim community has come not through political participation but through interfaith dialogue and coalition building.

This talk of dialogue brings me to Europe.

Not long ago I had an opportunity to take a road trip across several European countries. What surprised me was that I could not find borders anywhere. There are no border guards, border crossings or passport checks in the 24 countries that make up the European Union today. And this is in the birthplace of nationalism, which killed more people than all religious wars put together.

This is not the Europe of the history books. While many countries are fortifying themselves with billions of dollars worth of walls and wars, Europe has removed borders, gradually and methodologically. Maybe this is a lesson Europeans have learned with their World Wars.

There might be some lessons for interfaith leadership in the experience of present day European unity. The European unity movement did not start as much with dialogue as with working together. Through this, they developed the interconnectedness that led to other common projects. At least this is what a crude interpretation of neofunctionalist theory of European integration says.

This European experience of unity is a significant step forward in human civilization since its creation of nation-States restricted human interconnectedness through the strict

enforcements of borders, visas and passports. I believe this is closer to the ideal of mutual humanity which Prophets taught us all.

We should appreciate what Europeans have achieved in terms of integration of the European people beyond national borders—but can Europe take this effort beyond racial borders as well?

Can the faith and interfaith movement assist Europe in social cohesion across racial and religious boundaries?

Can the faith leadership take European integration to a higher level imbued with Prophetic ideals of inclusiveness and mutual humanity, as it struggles to overcome racism, anti-Semitism and rising Islamophobia?

I hope that dialogue and forums will help Europe move forward.

Dialogue works.

Muslims need to be in dialogue with themselves and their neighbors.

Intra-Muslim dialogue is the need of the hour. Not just between Shias and Sunnis but also what the world calls “Wahabis” and “Sufis,” and those talking the “theology of anger” as well as others declaring themselves “moderates.”

Religions are in and of themselves, largely a force for good. As human beings, we may not live up to the ideals of our own faith. However, Nationalisms have been the real killer not religions.

Faith groups can emerge as voices of conscience, if we can keep our demons in check. And interfaith work, I believe, helps us stay on our best behavior.

Our common causes of fighting poverty, oppression, violence and occupation are as connected as the ideals of mercy, love, selfless service and freedom.

Our well being depends on the well-being of every other human being on the planet. We as people of God must commit to simple living and sharing the resources of this planet with all six billion-plus other human beings equally.

While the struggle to change our world and ourselves may be long and painful, it will make us better-connected human beings, more deserving of God’s Mercy. His true servants.

Thank you and God bless.