

**"ISLAM AND THE WEST :  
PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE TOWARDS  
THE 21ST CENTURY"**

**BY**

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**1. Introduction**

While reflecting on the topic of the Seminar chosen by the sponsors, I thought it would be advisable to approach the challenging subject from three angles, namely (1) the ideals of Islam and her rationale for peaceful coexistence; (2) the realities of the relationship between the Western powers and the Muslim community; and (3) the challenges and prerequisites for a lasting peaceful relationship between the Western world and the Muslim world in the years ahead. In so doing I will reflect what I believe to be the general feeling and perceptions of Muslims worldwide who are committed to their faith.

**2. The Ideals of Peaceful Coexistence in  
Islamic Teachings and the Necessity for Peace**

- a) The objectives of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence are implied in the following verse of the Qur'an:

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\* Paper presented at the Seminar on "Islam and the West : Peaceful Coexistence Towards the 21st Century", organized by Malaysian Strategic Research Centre (MSRC) and Frederich Naumann Foundation in Kuala Lumpur on 5th June 1995.

13. ﴿١٣﴾ mankind! We created<sup>6203</sup>  
 You from a single (pair)  
 Of a male and a female,  
 And made you into  
 Nations and tribes, that  
 Ye may know each other  
 (Not that ye may despise  
 (Each other). Verily  
 The most honoured of you  
 In the sight of God  
 Is (he who is) the most  
 Righteous of you.  
 And God has full knowledge  
 And is well acquainted  
 (With all things).

(٤٩) سورة الحجرات  
 ﴿١٣﴾ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ  
 وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ  
 أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ  
 عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

(al-Hujurat : 13)

The right of other religions to exist in harmony with Islam is recognized in Islamic teachings and law. Non-believers are not forced to embrace Islam and vice-versa:

6. To you be your Way,  
 And to me mine.<sup>6201</sup>

﴿٦﴾ لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ

(al-Kafirun : 6)

The relationship between Islam and the religions of the "People of the of the Book" (Ahl al-Kitab) is defined very clearly in the Qur'an and adherents of three major Semitic religions i.e. Islam, Judaism and Christianity are enjoined to live in peace. Should hostilities break out among them, Muslims are exhorted to incline towards peace, if the enemy or the aggressor shows its desire for peaceful solutions.

- b) Islam teaches its adherents to live in peace (Arabic : salam) with adherents of other faiths and while it encourages da'wah (spreading the message of Islam) to non-adherents, it strictly prohibits compulsion or imposition of its teachings by force on others.

256. **Let there be no compulsion**<sup>300</sup>  
 In religion : Truth stands out  
 Clear from Error : whoever  
 Rejects Evil and believes  
 In God hath grasped  
 The most trustworthy  
 Hand-hold, that never breaks.<sup>301</sup>  
 And God heareth  
 And knoweth all things.

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ  
 تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ فَمَنْ  
 يَكْفُرْ بِالطَّاغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ  
 فَكَدَّ أَسْمَكَ بِالْمُرُوءِ الْوَقْتِ  
 لَا أَنْفُسَامَ لِمَا وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

(al-Baqarah : 256)

- c) The Qur'an exhorts Muslims to cooperate with peoples of other faith in righteous and mutually beneficial matters.

**Help ye one another**  
 In righteousness and piety,  
 But help ye not one another  
 In sin and rancour :  
 Fear God : for God  
 Is strict in punishment.

وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ  
 وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَاتَّقُوا  
 اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ

(al-Maidah : 2)

The Prophet himself entered into several treaty arrangements with non-Muslim communities which guaranteed peaceful relationships between them. War and violent confrontations were only allowed in Islam as a result of aggression, or provocation or treachery by the other party

- d) Non-Muslim communities such as Jews and Christians had lived in peaceful coexistence with majority Muslim communities in Arab countries and North Africa for hundreds of years. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948, however, was the major cause for the current conflict between Muslims and Israelis
- e) It has been acknowledged by Western scholars that Muslim scholarship and scientific pursuits in Andalusia had contributed significantly to the emergence of Renaissance in Europe. In the modern period, however, it is the turn of the Muslim community to benefit from Western scientific and technological advancement
- f) Muslim countries and communities today suffer from many ailments: disunity, economic impoverishment, political and educational underdevelopment, technological deficiency, illiteracy, disease and military dependency. They can scarcely afford to be embroiled in military conflicts with Western powers who are far more superior to them in material terms. Even conflicts among themselves serve to

aggravate the misery of the impoverished masses and make the political rulers more dependent on Western nations.

- g) With globalization as the megatrend of the near future, coupled with the spectre of economic wars between trade blocs and economically powerful nations, the Muslim world should devote its energies and harness its vast resources to improve its socio-economic standing on par with non-Muslim nations by enhancing "the knowledge society" ideal that Islam stands for.

**3. The Realities of Muslims and the West Today  
Which Act as Real Obstacles in the Search  
for Enduring and Sustainable Peace \_\_\_\_\_**

- a) The "New World Order" announced by George Bush during the Gulf War appears today to be more of a "New World Disorder". The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Russian Empire (and with it communism) have helped to make triumphant Liberal-Democratic and Capitalistic West more arrogant, authoritarian and more eager to bully smaller nations of the Third World. It is unfortunate that the United Nations tends to be strongly influenced by the dominant Western powers while many Muslim countries continue to be dependent on the goodwill of the West.
- b) Trade blocs dominated by the West such as NAFTA, APEC and the European Union are aimed at strengthening the economic position of

the "North" vis-a-vis the "South" and the relationship between Turkey and Western Europe appears to be an economically and politically precarious one. Many Turkish immigrants are facing the challenge of the rise of Neo-Nazism and racist discrimination in Western Europe. Similarly North African immigrants in France continue to be harassed by hostile anti-Islamic sentiments and policies in France. In U.K., Pakistanis and Indian Muslims residing in certain areas of Britain continue to become targets of the "Skin-Heads" and white supremacist youth gangs.

- c) Western powers seem to intervene very fast and effectively when Muslim countries are the target of their displeasure or when Muslims are fighting Muslims (Somalia), but when a Muslim community is being threatened with naked aggression, unspeakable brutalities and systematic "ethnic cleansing", they hesitate to use force and prefer the agonizing and feet-dragging diplomatic processes which allow the non-Muslim aggressors to strengthen their positions and then realize their sinister objectives. In the current case of Russian aggression in Chechnya (a Muslim majority country), the arrogant aggressor is also allowed by the Western powers to play havoc with Muslim lives. The unspeakable Bosnian atrocities and carnage today expose a lot of double-standards, deceit and hypocrisy among the so-called "international community" in the West.

- d) The pro-Israeli policy of many Western nations particularly U.S.A. is well-known. Israel is being armed to the teeth with the latest weapons of destruction while Muslim countries hostile to Israel have been severely punished, threatened or boycotted. The recent veto of the U.S.A. in the Security Council, perhaps with the connivance of A.I.P.A.C. (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee) with regard to Israel's plan to confiscate Palestinian land in East Jerusalem -- this confiscation process has been a part of Zionist expansionist policies all along -- and U.S.A's plan to transfer her embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in a few year's time, thus paving the way for the fait accompli Judaization of Jerusalem, are quite consistent with the traditional pro-Israel stand of U.S. administration, although at one time U.S. government was maintaining a policy of internalization of Jerusalem which is holy to the to the "Abrahamic".
- e) The support given by Western nations, who purportedly uphold democracy and basic human rights, to the Algerian army to wrest control by force from the Muslim people of Algeria when the first democratic elections in recent times gave overwhelming victory to Islamist forces, shows that the so-called democratic process would even be subverted by the "New World Order" if it would mean the triumph of the Islamist forces.
- f) Western political powers also seem to possess the sole privilege of



labelling Muslim nations as "terrorist" or "fundamentalist" or "obscurantist" while some of the most oppressive Muslim regimes in the world are being supported militarily and economically by them

- g) The powerful and influential Western media, with few exceptions, continue to portray the worst possible images, stereotypes and caricatures of Islam and Muslims, making Muslims and Islam the scapegoat for the West. They also succeeded in transplanting a negative Christian symbol and phenomenon, namely that of "fundamentalism" to the Muslim communities, groups and individuals, while Israel has always been promoted as the "only bastion of democracy" in the West Asia. Thus "terrorism", "militancy", "radicalism", "extremism" and "obscurantism", appear to be special traits of Islam and Muslims. Hence it is not at all surprising that both media and government automatically pointed their fingers at imaginary Muslim "terrorists" and harassed the Muslim community in U.S.A when the recent Oklahoma City bombing tragedy occurred, only to find the bitter truth later that the real culprits are in fact non-Muslim America's very own home-grown rebels from the extreme right.
- h) As far as the Muslims are concerned, it is also a reality that Muslim governments and regimes in the Muslim world subscribe to diverse and sometimes conflicting political ideologies. Many are misleading

the country and the people through authoritarianism, oppression and corruption. Some are so dependent upon the mercy of Western powers for their continued survival. Some of them deftly exploit Islamic teachings and symbols to gain support and legitimacy of their unpopular rule. It should be pointed out that in this regard the revival of Islamic activism or the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence in Muslim countries is, to a large extent, caused by and addressed to the Muslim community's own internal problems, ranging from avowed secularism, oppressive Marxism, moral corruption of the ruling forces, rampant materialism among the privileged elites, socio-economic injustices, blatant Westernization of Muslim culture to slavish cultural dependency upon former colonial masters. The Muslim masses in different Muslim countries, it should be reiterated, are forced to tolerate many kinds of rulers ranging from military dictatorships, Westernizing and secularizing elites to absolute monarchies. All of them would, of course, pay lip-service to Islamic ideals when they serve their political purposes. Another dimension of Muslim reality today is that Muslim groups and parties also consist of diverse orientations -- liberals, modernists, puritanists, traditionalists, moderates, radicals, etc. Some extremist elements, in certain circumstances and contexts, resort to actions not approved by the teachings of Islam and by the other Islamic groups. Just as the failure of Christianity in U.S.A., for instance, to control the behaviour, of deviationist Doom's Day cults should not lead non-

Christians to perceive Christianity as encouraging deviationist behaviour so also the failure of mainstream Islam to combat the lunatic fringe in the Muslim community should not lead Westerners to view the Muslim society as "bloodthirsty" or "deranged". It should be borne in mind that in some Muslim countries, tribal loyalties and values supersede religious values. The bitter internal feuds leading to open armed conflict, in the case of Afghanistan, imply that the bonds of Islamic brotherhood and solidarity are extremely brittle if not superficial.

**4. Challenges and Prerequisites for Genuine and Lasting Peaceful Coexistence Between Islam and the West in the Future**

- a) It is important for Muslims to understand the complexities of Western politics and the different trends in contemporary Western civilization. They should be able to distinguish the strengths and weaknesses in Western systems. They should also know the political and cultural differences between Americans and Europeans and among European nations themselves.
- b) Certainly there is a lot that Muslim nations can learn and benefit from the scientific enterprise and achievements in the West. Muslim religious scholars, for example, should be able to appreciate the great intellectual, technological and organizational achievements of the West.
- c) Muslim political and ruling elites should try to understand how the ideals and realities of democracy developed in the West and how the independence of the judiciary, legislative and executive branches of government -- which is an Islamic principle as well -- is maintained in the West.
- d) Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars can also benefit a great deal from the Western intellectual tradition of "agreeing to disagree"

among citizens and respecting differences of opinion which do not lead to violence or physical conflicts.

- e) Muslim masses can also benefit from learning how the West has instilled high civic consciousness among citizens of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and how their citizens conduct themselves in orderly manner in public places. Giving proper attention to the needs of the handicap in public places and the need to maintain cleanliness in those places is also something that Muslim governments and masses can learn for the technologically advanced countries in the West and in Japan.
- f) Muslim masses should also be able to distinguish between peoples of Western countries and their governments. Among the peoples of Western countries there are groups and NGO's who strongly disagree with their government's view or conduct vis-a-vis Muslims.
- g) Muslim masses and religious scholars should restrain themselves from making sweeping generalizations about the West, particularly when they know very little of what they are talking or making judgements about.
- h) In explaining Islam to Westerners, Muslim preachers should try to understand their religious sensitivities so as not to cause displeasure

or hostility among the latter.

- i) Muslim countries and organization have yet to develop their own print and electronic media to present the true picture of Islam to the West in spite of several OIC resolutions in the part urging the setting up of Islamic Press Agency. In the meantime, Western journalists and writers should be invited to see for themselves the Muslim way of life without malice or prejudice.
- j) Western governments and NGO groups should try to understand the unity and variety of Muslim cultures and the Islamic world-views. They have also to learn to appreciate the Asian or non-Western perspectives on the world. In looking at Islam, the security perspective or priority of the West has to change from looking at Islam as a "Threat" or an "Enemy" to "Islam as a Positive Civilizational Force" or "Co-Partners in a World New Order". Islam should not be studied by Western scholars or general public from the biased perspectives of scholars or writers who have an axe to grind.
- k) Western governments and political as well as economic institutions should not allow themselves to become tools of Zionist propaganda against Islam or the Arabs. Without objectivity in analysis, the picture will always be lopsided in favour of Israel or the Zionist lobby in Western or Eastern countries.

- l) To enhance their credibility in the eyes of Muslim elites, Western governments should be consistent in applying the principles of human rights, democracy or free trade, for actions speak louder than words.
  
- m) Western governments and NGO groups should not try to promote or popularize the personality, views or works of certain Muslim individuals who purposely disparage, malign or blaspheme Islam in the name of literary freedom or modernity, as in the cases of Salman Rushdie and Tasleema Nasreen.

## 5. Conclusion

The 21st century is only five years away from now (1995). Hopefully when Muslims and Westerners step into the new century they would both realize that planet Earth has been ravaged through the recent centuries by human greed for power, dominance and hegemony; her environment has become so polluted as a result of the misuse of science and technology; and her resources have become so depleted that she cannot be expected to cope with more demands in the future. It would then dawn upon the whole of humanity that the Earth was never meant by God to be dominated by the West or the East, the North or the South. The Earth belongs to God alone and peoples of all religions and ideologies will have to accept the necessity of sharing her limited resources. It is therefore imperative that the spiritual values of humility, love and sacrifice for the common good which cut across the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam be allowed to prevail over the "gods" of scientism, agnosticism, materialism, secularism, tribalism and racism.

The era of neo-imperialism and religious extremism, if mankind is to survive the new millennium, must give way to a new age of global interdependency, global sharing, common stewardship of the earth, interreligious accommodation and mutual respect which transcends racial and colour differences.