

Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

## Islam and the West

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Ladies and gentlemen, it was suggested to me when I first began to consider the subject of this lecture that I should take comfort from the Arab proverb: "In every head there is some wisdom." I confess that I have few qualifications as a scholar to justify my presence here in this theatre, where so many people much more learned than I have preached and generally advanced the sum of human knowledge. I might feel more prepared if I were an offspring of your distinguished university, rather than a product of that "Technical College of the Fens," though I hope you will bear in mind that a chair of Arabic was established in seven-teenth-century Cambridge a full four years before your first chair of Arabic at Oxford.

Unlike many of you, I am not an expert on Islam, though I am delighted, for reasons that I hope will become clear, to be a vice patron of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. The Centre has the potential to be an important and exciting vehicle for promoting and improving understanding of the Islamic world in Britain, and one which I hope will earn its place alongside other centres of Islamic study in Oxford, like the Oriental Institute and the Middle East Centre, as an institution of which the university, and scholars more widely, will become justly proud.

Given all the reservations I have about venturing into a complex and controversial field, you may well ask why I am here in this marvelous Wren building talking to you on the subject of Islam and the West. The reason is, ladies and gentlemen, that I believe wholeheartedly that the links between these two worlds matter more today than ever before, because the degree of misunderstanding between the Islamic and the west-

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ern worlds remains dangerously high and because the need for the two to live and work together in our increasingly interdependent world has never been greater. At the same time, I am only too well aware of the minefields that lie across the path of the inexperienced traveler who is bent on exploring this difficult route. Some of what I shall say will undoubtedly provoke disagreement, criticism, misunderstanding, and probably worse. But perhaps, when all is said and done, it is worth recalling another Arab proverb: "What comes from the lips reaches the ears. What comes for the heart reaches the heart."

The depressing fact is that, despite the advances in technology and mass communications of the second half of the twentieth century, despite mass travel, the intermingling of races, the ever-growing reduction—or so we believe—of the mysteries of our world, misunderstandings between Islam and the West continue. Indeed, they may be growing. As far as the West is concerned, this cannot be because of ignorance. There are one billion Muslims worldwide. Many millions of them live in countries of the Commonwealth. Ten million or more live in the West, and around one million in Britain. Our own Islamic community has been growing and flourishing for decades. There are nearly five hundred mosques in Britain. Popular interest in Islamic culture in Britain is growing fast. Many of you will recall—and I think some of you took part in—the wonderful Festival of Islam which Her Majesty The Queen opened in 1976. Islam is all around us, and yet distrust, even fear, persist.

In the post-Cold War world of the 1990s, prospects for peace should be greater than at any time in this century. In the Middle East, the remarkable and encouraging events of recent weeks have created new hope for an end to an issue that has divided the world and been so dramatic a source of violence and hatred. But the dangers have not disappeared. In the Muslim world, we are seeing the unique way of life of the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq, thousands of years old, being devastated and destroyed systematically. I confess that for a whole year I have wanted to find a suitable opportunity to express my despair and outrage at the unmentionable horrors being perpetrated in southern Iraq. To me, the supreme and tragic irony of what has been happening to the Shi'ah population of Iraq—especially in the ancient city and holy shrine of Karbala—is that after the western allies took immense care to avoid bombing such holy places (and I remember begging General Schwarzkopf when I met him in Riyadh in December 1990 to do his best to protect such shrines during any conflict) it was Saddam Hussein himself, and his terrifying regime, who caused the destruction of some of Islam's holiest sites. And now we have had to witness the deliberate draining of the marshes and the near total destruction of a unique habitat, together with an entire population that has depended upon it since the dawn of human civiliza-

tion. The international community has been told that the draining of the marshes is for agricultural purposes. How many more obscene lies do we have to be told before action is taken? Even at the eleventh hour it is still not too late to prevent a total cataclysm. I pray that this might at least be a cause in which Islam and the West could join forces for the sake of our common humanity.

I have highlighted this particular example because it is so avoidable. Elsewhere, the violence and hatred are more intractable and deep-seated, as we go on seeing every day to our horror in the wretched suffering of peoples across the world—in the former Yugoslavia, in Somalia, Angola, Sudan, and in so many of the former Soviet republics. In Yugoslavia, the terrible suffering of the Bosnian Muslims, alongside that of other communities in that cruel war, help keep alive many of the fears and prejudices that our two worlds retain of each other. Conflict, of course, comes about because of the misuse of power and the clash of ideals, not to mention the inflammatory activities of unscrupulous and bigoted leaders. But it also arises, tragically, from an inability to understand and from the powerful emotions that, out of misunderstanding, lead to distrust and fear. Ladies and gentlemen, we must not slide into a new era of danger and division because governments and peoples, communities and religions, cannot live together in peace in a shrinking world.

It is odd, in many ways, that misunderstandings between Islam and the West persist, for what binds our two worlds together is much more powerful than what divides us. Muslims, Christians, and Jews all are "peoples of the Book." Islam and Christianity share a common monotheistic vision: a belief in one divine God, in the transience of our earthly life, in our accountability for our actions, and in the assurance of life to come. We share many key values in common: respect for knowledge, justice, compassion towards the poor and underprivileged, the importance of family life, and respect for parents. "Honor thy father and thy mother" is a Qur'anic precept too. Our history has been closely bound up together.

There is, however, one root of the problem: much of that history has been one of conflict—fourteen centuries too often marred by mutual hostility. That has given rise to an enduring tradition of fear and distrust, because our two worlds have so often seen that past in contradictory ways. To western school children, the two hundred years of the Crusades are traditionally seen as a series of heroic, chivalrous exploits in which the kings, knights, princes, and children of Europe tried to wrest Jerusalem from the wicked Muslim infidels. To Muslims, the Crusades were an episode of great cruelty and terrible plunder, of western infidel soldiers of fortune and horrific atrocities, perhaps exemplified best by the massacres committed by the Crusaders when, in 1099, they took back Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam. For us in the West, 1492 speaks

of human endeavor and new horizons, of Columbus and the discovery of the Americas. To Muslims, 1492 is a year of tragedy—the year Granada fell to Ferdinand and Isabella, signifying the end of eight centuries of Muslim civilization in Europe. The point, I think, is not that one or the other picture is more true or has a monopoly of truth. Rather, it is that misunderstandings arise when we fail to appreciate how others look at the world, its history, and our respective roles in it.

The corollary of how we in the West see our history has so often been to regard Islam as a threat, in medieval times as a military conqueror and in more modern times as a source of intolerance, extremism, and terrorism. One can understand how the taking of Constantinople, when it fell to Sultan Mehmet in 1453, and the close-run defeats of the Turks outside Vienna in 1529 and 1683, should have sent shivers of fear through Europe's rulers. The history of the Balkans under Ottoman rule provided examples of cruelty that sank deep into western feelings. But the threat has not been one way. With Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, followed by the invasions and conquests of the nineteenth century, the pendulum swung, and almost all of the Arab world became occupied by the western powers. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Europe's triumph over Islam seemed complete. Those days of conquest are over.

But even now our common attitude to Islam suffers because the way we understand it has been hijacked by the extreme and the superficial. To many of us in the West, Islam is seen in terms of the tragic civil war in Lebanon, the killings and bombings perpetrated by extremist groups in the Middle East, and by what is commonly referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism." Our judgment of Islam has been grossly distorted by taking the extremes to be the norm. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a serious mistake. It is like judging the quality of life in Britain by the existence of murder and rape, child abuse and drug addiction. The extremes exist and they must be dealt with. But when used as a basis to judge a society, they lead to distortion and unfairness.

For example, people in this country frequently argue that the Shari'ah law of the Islamic world is cruel, barbaric, and unjust. Our newspapers, above all, love to peddle those unthinking prejudices. The truth is, of course, different and always more complex. My own understanding is that extremes, like the cutting off of hands, are rarely practiced. The guiding principle and spirit of Islamic law, taken straight from the Qur'an, should be that of equity and compassion. We need to study its actual application before we make judgments. We must distinguish between systems of justice administered with integrity and systems of justice, as we may see them practiced, that have been deformed for political reasons into something no longer Islamic. We must bear in mind the sharp debate taking place in the Islamic world itself about the extent of the universality or

timelessness of Shari'ah law as well as the degree to which the application of that law is continually changing and evolving.

We should also distinguish Islam from the customs of some Islamic states. Another obvious Western prejudice is to judge the position of women in Islamic society by the extreme cases. Yet Islam is not a monolith and the picture is not simple. Remember, if you will, that Islamic countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Syria gave women the vote as early as Europe did its women—and much earlier than in Switzerland. In those countries, women have long enjoyed equal pay and the opportunity to play a full working role in their societies. The rights of Muslim women to property and inheritance, to some protection if divorced, and to the conducting of business were rights prescribed by the Qur'an twelve hundred years ago, even if they were not everywhere translated into practice. In Britain at least, some of these rights were novel even to my grandmother's generation! Benazir Bhutto and Begum Khaleda Zia became prime ministers in their own traditional societies when Britain had for the first time ever in its history elected a female prime minister. That, I think, does not smack of a medieval society.

Women are not automatically second-class citizens because they live in Islamic countries. We cannot judge the position of women in Islam aright if we take the most conservative Islamic states as representative of the whole. For example, the veiling of women is not at all universal across the Islamic world. Indeed, I was intrigued to learn that the custom of wearing the veil owed much to Byzantine and Sassanian traditions and nothing to the Prophet of Islam. Some Muslim women never adopted the veil, others have discarded it, while others—particularly the younger generation—have more recently chosen to wear the veil or the head scarf as a personal statement of their Muslim identity. But we should not confuse the modesty of dress prescribed by the Qur'an for men as well as women with the outward forms of secular custom or social status that have their origins elsewhere.

We in the West also need to understand the Islamic world's view of us. There is nothing to be gained, and much harm to be done, by refusing to comprehend the extent to which many people in the Islamic world genuinely fear our own western materialism and mass culture as a deadly challenge to their Islamic culture and way of life. Some of us may think the material trappings of western society that we have exported to the Islamic world—television, fast-food, and the electronic gadgets of our everyday lives—are a modernizing, self-evidently good, influence. But we fall into the trap of dreadful arrogance if we confuse "modernity" in other countries with their becoming more like us. The fact is that our form of materialism *can* be offensive to devout Muslims—and I do not just mean the extremists among them. We must understand that reaction, just as the

West's attitude to some of the more rigorous aspects of Islamic life needs to be understood in the Islamic world. This, I believe, would help us understand what we have commonly come to see as the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. We need to be careful of that emotive label, "fundamentalism," and distinguish, as Muslims do, between revivalists, who choose to take the practice of their religion most devoutly, and fanatics or extremists, who use this devotion for political ends. Among the many religious, social, and political causes of what we might more accurately call the Islamic revival is a powerful feeling of disenchantment, of the realization that western technology and material things are insufficient, and that a deeper meaning to life lies elsewhere—in the essence of Islamic belief.

At the same time, we must not be tempted to believe that extremism is in some way the hallmark and essence of the Muslim. Extremism is no more the monopoly of Islam than it is the monopoly of other religions, including Christianity. The vast majority of Muslims, though personally pious, are moderate in their politics. Theirs is the "religion of the middle way." The Prophet himself always disliked and feared extremism. Perhaps the fear of Islamic revivalism that colored the 1980s is now beginning to give way in the West to an understanding of the genuine spiritual forces behind this groundswell. But if we are to understand this important movement, we must learn to distinguish clearly between what the vast majority of Muslims believe and the terrible violence of a small minority among them that civilized people everywhere must condemn.

Ladies and gentlemen, if there is much misunderstanding in the West about the nature of Islam, there is also much ignorance about the debt our own culture and civilization owe to the Islamic world. It is a failure that stems, I think, from the straightjacket of history that we have inherited. The medieval Islamic world, from Central Asia to the shores of the Atlantic, was a world where scholars and men of learning flourished. But because we have tended to see Islam as the enemy of the West, as an alien culture, society, and system of belief, we have tended to ignore or erase its great relevance to our own history. For example, we have underestimated the importance of the eight hundred years of Islamic society and culture in Spain between the eighth and the fifteenth centuries. The contribution of Muslim Spain to the preservation of classical learning during the Dark Ages and to the first flowerings of the Renaissance has long been recognized.

But Islamic Spain was much more than a mere larder where Hellenistic knowledge was kept for later consumption by the emerging modern western world. Not only did Muslim Spain gather and preserve the intellectual content of ancient Greek and Roman civilization, but it also interpreted and expanded upon that civilization *and* made a vital contribution of its own in so many fields of human endeavor—in science, astronomy,

mathematics, algebra (itself an Arabic word), law, history, medicine, pharmacology, optics, agriculture, architecture, theology, and music. Averroes and Avenzoar, like their counterparts Avicenna and Rhazes in the East, contributed to the study and practice of medicine in ways from which Europe benefited for centuries afterwards.

Islam nurtured and preserved the quest for learning. In the words of the tradition "The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr," Cordoba in the tenth century was by far the most civilized city of Europe. We know of lending libraries in Spain at the time King Alfred was making terrible blunders with the culinary arts in this country. It is said that the four hundred thousand volumes in its ruler's library amounted to more books than all the libraries of the rest of Europe put together. That was made possible because the Muslim world acquired from China the skill of making paper more than four hundred years before the rest of non-Muslim Europe. Many of the traits on which modern Europe prides itself came to it from Muslim Spain. Diplomacy, free trade, open borders, the techniques of academic research, anthropology, etiquette, fashion, alternative medicine, hospitals, all came from this great city of cities.

Medieval Islam was a religion of remarkable tolerance for its time, allowing Jews and Christians the right to practice their inherited beliefs and setting an example which was not, unfortunately, copied for many centuries in the West. The surprise, ladies and gentlemen, is the extent to which Islam has been a part of Europe for so long, first in Spain, then in the Balkans, and the extent to which it has contributed so much towards the civilization that we all too often think of, wrongly, as entirely western. Islam is part of our past and our present, in all fields of human endeavor. It has helped to create modern Europe. It is part of our own inheritance, not a thing apart.

More than this, Islam can teach us today a way of understanding and living in the world that Christianity itself is poorer for having lost. At the heart of Islam is its preservation of an integral view of the universe. Islam, like Buddhism and Hinduism, refuses to separate man and nature, religion and science, mind and matter, and has preserved a metaphysical and unified view of ourselves and the world around us. At the core of Christianity there still lies an integral view of the sanctity of the world and a clear sense of the trusteeship and responsibility given to us for our natural surroundings. In the words of that marvelous seventeenth-century poet and hymn writer, George Herbert:

A man that looks on glass,  
On it may stay his eye;

Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heaven espy.

But the West gradually lost this integrated vision of the world with Copernicus, Descartes, and the coming of the scientific revolution. A comprehensive philosophy of nature is no longer part of our everyday beliefs. I cannot help feeling that if we could only rediscover that earlier, all-embracing approach to the world around us and to see and understand its deeper meaning, we could begin to get away from the increasing tendency in the West to live on the surface of our surroundings, where we study our world to manipulate and dominate it, turning harmony and beauty into disequilibrium and chaos. It is a sad fact, I believe, that in so many ways the external world we have created in the last few hundred years has come to reflect our own divided and confused inner state. Western civilization has become increasingly acquisitive and exploitative in defiance of our environmental responsibilities. This crucial sense of oneness and trusteeship of the vital sacramental and spiritual character of the world about us is surely something important we can relearn from Islam.

I am quite sure some will instantly accuse me, as they usually do, of living in the past, of refusing to come to terms with reality and modern life. On the contrary, ladies and gentlemen, what I am appealing for is a wider, deeper, more careful understanding of our world, for a metaphysical as well as material dimension to our lives, in order to recover the balance we have abandoned, the absence of which, I believe, will prove disastrous in the long term. If the ways of thought found in Islam and other religions can help us in that search, then there are things for us to learn from this system of belief that I suggest we ignore at our peril.

Ladies and gentlemen, we live today in one world, forged by instant communication, television, and the exchange of information on a scale undreamed of by our grandparents. The world economy functions as an interdependent entity. Problems of society, the quality of life, and the environment are global in their causes and effects, and none of us any longer has the luxury of being able to solve them on our own. The Islamic and western worlds share problems common to us all: how we adapt to change in our societies, how we help young people who feel alienated from their parents or their society's values, and how we deal with AIDS, drugs, and the disintegration of the family. Of course, these problems vary in nature and intensity between societies. The problems of our own inner cities are not identical to those of Cairo or Damascus. But the similarity of human experience is considerable. The international trade in hard drugs is one example; the damage we are collectively doing to our environment is another. We have to solve these threats to our communities and our lives together. Simply getting to know each other can

achieve wonders. I remember vividly, for example, taking a group of Muslims and non-Muslims some years ago to see the work of the Marylebone Health Centre in London, of which I am Patron. The enthusiasm and common determination that shared experience generated was immensely heart-warming.

Ladies and gentlemen, somehow we have to learn to understand each other and to educate our children—a new generation—whose attitudes and cultural outlook may be different from ours, so that they understand too. We have to show trust, mutual respect, and tolerance if we are to find the common ground between us and work together to find solutions. The community enterprise approach of my own Trust, and the very successful Volunteers Scheme it has run for some years, show how much can be achieved by a common effort that spans classes, cultures, and religions. The Islamic and western worlds can no longer afford to stand apart from a common effort to solve their common problems.

We cannot afford to revive the territorial and political confrontations of the past. We have to share experiences, to explain ourselves to each other, to understand and tolerate, and to build on those positive principles that our two cultures have in common. That trade has to be two-way. Each of us needs to understand the importance of conciliation, of reflection (*tadabbur*), to open our minds and unlock our hearts to each other. I am utterly convinced that the Islamic and the western worlds have much to learn from each other. Just as the oil engineer in the Gulf may be European, so the heart transplant surgeon in Britain may be Egyptian.

If this need for tolerance and exchange is true internationally, it applies with special force within Britain itself. Britain is a multiracial and multicultural society. I have already mentioned the size of our own Muslim communities who live throughout Britain, both in large towns like Bradford and in tiny communities in places as remote as Stornaway in western Scotland. These people, ladies and gentlemen, are an asset to Britain. They contribute to all parts of our economy—to industry, the public services, the professions, and the private sector. We find them as teachers, doctors, engineers, and scientists. They contribute to our economic well-being as a country and add to the cultural richness of our nation.

Of course, tolerance and understanding must be two-way. For those of us who are not Muslim, that may mean respect for the daily practice of the Islamic faith and a decent care to avoid actions that are likely to cause deep offense. For the Muslims in our society, there is the need to respect the history, culture, and way of life of our country and to balance their vital liberty to be themselves with an appreciation of the importance of integration into our society. Where there are failings of understanding and tolerance, we have a need, on our own doorstep, for greater reconciliation among our own citizens. I hope we shall all learn to demonstrate

that as understanding between these communities grows. I can only admire and applaud those men and women of so many denominations who work tirelessly in London, South Wales, the Midlands, and elsewhere to promote good community relations. The Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Birmingham is one especially notable and successful example. We should be grateful, I believe, for the dedication and example of all those who have devoted themselves to the cause of promoting understanding.

Ladies and gentlemen, if in the last half hour your eyes have wandered up to the marvelous allegory of Truth descending on the arts and sciences in Sir Robert Streeter's ceiling above you, I am sure you will have noticed Ignorance being violently banished from the arena—just there in front of the organ casing. I feel some sympathy for Ignorance, and hope I may be permitted to vacate this theatre in a somewhat better condition. Before I go, I cannot put to you strongly enough the importance of the issues that I have tried to touch on so imperfectly. These two worlds, the Islamic and the western, are at something of a crossroads in their relations. We must not let them stand apart. I do not accept the argument that they are on a course of conflict in a new era of antagonism. I am convinced that our two worlds have much to offer each other. We have much to do together. I am delighted that the dialogue has begun, both in Britain and elsewhere. But we need to work harder to understand each other, to drain out any poison between us, and to lay the ghost of suspicion and fear to rest. The further down that road we can travel, the better the world we shall create for our children and future generations.

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