

RELIGIONS IN DIALOGUE FOR A WORLD WITHOUT VIOLENCE

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Professor Dr. M. Din Syamsuddin - Chairman Muhammadiyah, Indonesia Presented at International meeting for Peace "Banishing Violence from the World: Faiths and Cultures in Dialogue" Naples, 21-23 October 2007 Ladies and Gentlemen, First of all, I would like to thank the organizer for inviting me to this prestigious event. For me, attending this kind of dialogue among religions and civilisations has always been a reminder that cooperation and peaceful relationship among people of different faiths is not only desirable but also possible. It really gives me a new ground for optimism regarding the future of our world.

Despite the persistence of violence that we see today, I continue to hold on to my belief and conviction that we, as men of faith, should never give up in our struggle to provide guidance for the creation of a world without violence. We should never abandon the mission to eradicate violence, no matter how difficult the task is. We should continue reminding the world that violence would never resolve any problem. In fact, it will only breed more violence. In other words, violence never becomes a solution. It is indeed disheartening to see that conflicts and the use of violence remain a defining characteristic of today's world. When we look at the world today, the absence of peace continues to be a key feature of most countries in underdeveloped and developing world. It is in this vastly populated part of the world where all kind of conflicts could be found. Internal conflicts --either in the form of communal violence, conflicts for self-determination, genocides, or separatist conflicts-- are mostly fought within underdeveloped and developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. There were 118 major armed conflicts in 80 different locations between the end of the Cold War and 2004. The majority of these were civil wars. In 2003 alone, 19 major armed conflicts occurred in 18 locations throughout the world. However, we should also note that the use of violence as an instrument either to resolve problem or to achieve political objectives has not been the monopoly of underdeveloped and developing countries. We continue to witness the display of military prowess as an instrument of problem-solving by major powers. Afghanistan and Iraq, which plunged into conflicts due to the actions by the United States, are only the most recent examples. In this regard, the use of war as a political instrument in Iraq ‐which is the most extreme form of violence‐has only brought about more violence. Ladies and Gentlemen, Given such dire situation in our world today, the key question is this: "how can religion and religious leaders contribute to the creation of a world without violence?" Is there a role that we can play so that the relevance of the use of violence as an instrument of problem-solving would diminish, if not become obsolete? I do believe that the answer to these questions lie in the continuing efforts by those of us who believe in the imperative of a world without violence to continue seeking a genuine dialogues among religions and civilisations. We should continue pursue our common dream of a new world civilisation based on social justice, equality, harmony, and prosperity. In this regard, religions clearly speak the language of peace. We should never surrender even though the challenges to our efforts to spread the message of peace are increasingly becoming more and more difficult. Indeed, the proliferation of dialogues among civilisations seems to have not completely removed the danger. The flurry of inter-faith dialogues, both state-driven and society-driven, seems to have generated little success in removing the prejudices, misconceptions, and misunderstanding among people of different religions, especially between Islam and the Christian West. Mutual suspicion continues to characterise the ongoing relationship between the Muslim world and the West. This reality clearly points to the imperative of not only doing more, but also doing it right. So much has been done to address the problem. But, progresses have not been entirely satisfactory. However, it would be misleading also to claim that the ongoing initiatives on inter-faith dialogues or dialogues among civilisations are no more than pointless exercises. These dialogues do create a greater space for mutual learning process. They expand the boundary of mutual understanding among people from different religious and civilisational background. They create the imperative of enhanced interaction among people from different faith. Dialogues have also opened up more opportunities for closer cooperation among faith-based organisations and communities to address problems of humanity and for the betterment of the society. Various initiatives in this area have also reminded states that religion and religious leaders do have a positive role to play in international relations. Religion does serve as a source of values and norms that could provide guidance for a healthy inter-state relations based on mutual understanding, mutual respects, and equality. Those dialogues also serve as a venue for religious leaders to articulate their aspiration for a peaceful and just world. At grass-root level, inter-faith dialogues can provide the basis for peace among communities of different religions. Dialogues could remove mutual suspicions which often result from ignorance, lack of knowledge about each others, and the absence of mutual respect. However, problems remain abundant with regard to the ongoing inter-faith dialogues and dialogue of civilisations. The key obstacle in using inter-faith dialogues as an instrument to address the problem between the Muslim world and the West is the gap between the ideal world of religious actors on the one hand, and the cruel world of political players. Inter-faith dialogues have often been constrained by the gap between society and the state. When religious actors work hard to create a better world based on mutual understanding and mutual respect among different faiths, the results of the works by political actors tend to undermine it, intentionally or not. When religious actors advocate the method of peace, political actors continue to value the utility of force and even war. When religious actors emphasise national and global spirituality, political actors exaggerate the importance of national and global security. Ladies and Gentlemen, In order to address the problem mentioned above, there are four steps that we need to take. First, there is a need to reform our mindset and our way of thinking. Here, a paradigmatic shift is necessary. Instead of looking at the problem through the framework of "clash of civilisation," we need to advocate the framework of "alliance of civilisation." Within this paradigm, a way of thinking that juxtaposes Islam and the West becomes an irrelevant exercise. Islam and the West should not be seen as a binary opposition. Islam and the West should be seen as the pillars of a common global civilisation. Islam and the West should be treated as two forces that compliment each other in ensuring and preserving the future of mankind. Islam and the West should be seen as partners in a common struggle to preserve the sanctity of

religion as a source of values for mankind. Islam and the West should work together to prevent the use of religion as a political tool in the quest for supremacy among nations. In fact, the quest for supremacy among nations should be removed from any nation's agenda. Second, in order for any mutual understanding to prevail, it is necessary to conduct dialogues in a context of equality. Dialogues should proceed from the presence of mutual eagerness to learn and understand about each other. Society-driven dialogues, especially among religious leaders themselves, have to a certain extent managed to conduct inter-faith dialogues on this basis. However, there is still the question of authenticity with regards to the state-driven dialogues. Are politicians genuinely trying to reach a mutual understanding and mutual respects among different civilisations? When the gap between declaratory intention and the actual policies remains wide, the utility of inter-faith dialogues would gradually be questioned. If this happens, then it would be difficult to sustain the progress that has been achieved so far through various initiatives of inter-faith dialogues. Third, the problem in the relationship between the Muslim world and the West could be resolved if there is a parallel efforts by both religious and political leaders. Religious leaders should provide an atmosphere of spirituality for better mutual understanding and mutual respect, while political leaders should work to eliminate global injustices. Religious leaders should advocate a genuine adherence to religious principles and norms, while political leaders should avoid the practice of double standards in pursuing their politics. There should be no gap between words and deeds. Indeed, the root causes of the tension between the Muslim world and the West can be among others found within the persistent global injustice. We should work together to eliminate this global injustice, which serves as a structural cause to the global tension. The West is in a better position to address this problem. Finally, the elimination of global injustice alone cannot guarantee the birth of a world free from any tension and conflict between the Muslim world and the West. The Muslim world has its own predicament also. Many Muslims, in fact the majority of Muslims, continue to live within the control of despotic regimes and authoritarian states. This characteristic of most of the Muslim world needs to be addressed by both Muslim population and Muslim rulers. Respects for human rights, and a democratic political order, is the path that all of us should take. Freedom is an essence of Islamic teaching. Islam teaches and preaches that human beings should be liberated from exploitation by other human beings. The creation of a political order that ensures and respects human dignity should be made a priority by Muslim rulers. Genuine tolerance, and a sense of self-confidence among the population, can only prevail in a truly democratic order. Indeed, a better world requires changes both in the West and in the Muslim world. These changes do not have to be come in a separate process. Both the Muslim world and the West should, and can, work together in addressing and removing the impediments to progress within both civilisations. It only requires an open mind and a genuine effort. The problem is, open mind and genuine effort is still hard to come by. However, we are all forbidden from losing hope. It is this hope that will ensure the utility of every single step that we are all taking in order to bridge the West and the Muslim world. It is through the preservation of hope that life continues to be meaningful. Thank you,