

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF PEACE: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE POST- SECULAR WORLD

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Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honor for me to take part in this prestigious Rhodes Forum in this beautiful Rhodes Island, Greece. The focus of this forum to analyze the viability of global civilization is relevant to our our need today. We are all now facing tremendous challenges in today's world. The promise of peace

dividend brought about by the end of the Cold War is yet to materialize. Our common dream of a new world civilization based on social justice, equality, prosperity and harmony has yet to become a reality. It is indeed disheartening to see that conflicts remain a defining characteristic of today's world.

What is threatening human civilizations today and resulting in accumulative global damages, is not only the persistence of wars, conflicts, and even global terrorism, but also the absence of peace in many forms, such as poverty, illiteracy, injustice, discrimination, including environmental collapse.

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. We found in many parts of the globe 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. The developed world has not been helpful in this regard. We continue to witness the display of military prowess as an instrument of problem-solving by major powers.

The future of peace among civilizations in the world cannot be separated from the state of peace at global level. Prejudices, misperceptions, and polarizations are also present in this part of the world. Therefore, interfaith dialogues as well intercultural dialogues, both the state-driven and the society-driven dialogues, are very important to address the need for sustainable peace. The relationship between the Muslim world and the West cannot be taken for granted to be continuously harmonious, especially in the last decade. Though we may not subscribe to the

Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilizations, but we cannot ignore that there are, to some extents, tensions and "psychological conflicts" between the Muslim World and the West. This development has been influenced by the way the great world power launched war on terror by connecting terrorism to Islam and making generalization to the Muslims, and the way the great power involved in other countries.

Way Forwards: The Partnership of Civilizations

Since the launching of the Report of the High Level Group on the Alliance of Civilizations in November 2006, we have had a more solid ground to address the problem of "civilization divide" that has strained not only the relationship among states but also among the people of the world. As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan has stated during the launching of

the Report, “this initiative is intended to respond to the need for a committed effort by the international community –both at the institutional and civil society levels—to bridge divides and overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization which potentially threaten world peace”.

The Partnership of Civilizations initiative is clearly relevant to address these problems. The need for bridging the Muslim world and the West, for example, continues to be a defining agenda of the day. Exactly one decade since September 11, international politics is still defined by the danger of “clash of civilizations” and the continued use of force as an instrument to resolve problems. The proliferation of dialogues among civilizations 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 West. Mutual suspicion continues to characterize 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. Some might see with a degree of cynicism the proliferation of interfaith dialogues, dialogues among civilizations, or any other initiatives to promote mutual understanding and respect among religions. However, it would be misleading also to claim that the ongoing initiatives on inter-faith dialogues or dialogues among civilizations 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 civilizational 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 organizations 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.

Within that context, the best way forward is to promote interfaith cooperation and intercivilizational dialogue. Through this endeavor, we can promote better understanding of the problem, encourage mutual respects, and fight the threat of terrorism in a more effective way. Through dialogue and cooperation, misunderstanding and mutual suspicion could be reduced. The future of mankind depends on the willingness of all parties to learn about each other, to respect each other, and to work together to create a just and peaceful world.

However, problems remain abundant with regard to the ongoing interfaith dialogues and dialogue of civilizations. The key obstacle in using interfaith dialogues as an instrument to address the problem of the world is the gap between the ideal world of religious actors on the one hand, and the cruel world of political players. Interfaith 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 emphasize national and global spirituality, political actors exaggerate the importance of national and global security.

Second, the conversation between Islam and the West tends to be one-sided. It is important to acknowledge that the attention and the focus more on how to understand Islam. Implicit in this reality is the assumption that Islam needs to be understood because the problem is to be found within this community of ummah. Bernard Lewis, for example, has asked: what's wrong with Islam? Others have questioned whether Islam will ever accept the reality of the West and therefore co-exist with it in a peaceful and productive way. Worse, there have also been questions raised in the West on how to deal with the so-called "Islamic threat." Constructed in this way, it would be difficult for any dialogue to produce fruitful results. The Muslim community is then cornered to a defensive position, trying hard to explain that their religion is indeed a religion of peace and poses no threat to any other religion.

Third, the transformation of the United States into a national security state since September 11, and its corollary War on Terror, has exacerbated the problem of inter-civilization relations. The US use of force as an instrument of conflict resolution and the primacy of prejudices in dealing with the Muslim world have created an impression that the West is using the War on Terror as a disguise for an anti-Islam attitude. The combination between unfair treatment of Muslims and the Muslim world by the West and the disillusionment of Muslims in many Muslim despotic states has served as a recipe for civilizational calamity. When the perceived arrogance of the West meets with the predicament of Muslim world, the future of harmonious relations between Islam and the West has been put in jeopardy. In other words, the war on terror as practiced by the US has posed a serious barrier to a genuine dialogue among

civilizations and undermined the relationship between Islam and the West.

So, what more to be done? Let me offer a few thoughts regarding this matter. 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 civilization”, we need to advocate the framework of “alliance of civilization”. 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 civilization. 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 civilizations? 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. Regarding on this matter, inter-faith dialogue must be performed with optimistic view. Dialogues would not be meaningful unless parties to such dialogues are able to articulate their point of views in a frank and candid manner or in the mean of dialogical dialogues. Dialogues would quickly turn into a political theatre if we can not be honest with each other. We should make candidness and honesty as the foundation for any dialogue. Fruitful dialogues could only be achieved in an environment that promotes candidness and honesty within a spirit of togetherness and friendship. But, only dialogue is not quite enough. Dialogue must be followed by cooperation among religions and nations. In this context, I think that we

need to invite the very selected of the excluded communities. It means that we need to invite them for practicing dialogical dialogue and also to give them space for understanding each other.

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.

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 civilizations. It only requires an open mind and a genuine effort. The problem of open-mind and genuine effort is still hard to come by. However, we are all forbidden from loosing 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.

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