

Human Dignity and Mutual Respect

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Your eminences, excellencies, distinguished guests and friends. Peace be with you, and the mercy and compassion of God.

Our meeting in this historic place is, God willing, a celebration and a sign of hope. Celebration as we together feast on God's revealed words, nourished and sustained to carry the message of truth and reconciliation to the communities which we represent. And hope, in the assurance that the scrutiny which Heaven assuredly directs to our deliberations and to the states of our hearts in these days will overlook our many shortcomings, and be the sign under which the best and most fruitful exchanges of our two faiths in the past will continue to inspire us, while we find new and successful means of overcoming both those misunderstandings and those errors of intention which have, in past ages, led us into conflicts displeasing to God.

It is evident to us all how close is the relationship between the great subject of our discussions yesterday and the subject which we address today. Indeed, it is this relationship which lies at the heart of the distinctiveness of the religious response to the crisis of modernity. Ours is an age in which noble efforts are made to esteem humanity, through codes of human rights and international conventions of many kinds. Yet the philosophy which, in today's prevailing secular climate, seeks to offer foundations to these efforts today seems to exist in a state of crisis. The Enlightenment, source of much that is precious to our contemporary understanding of human dignity, was attacked in its day by religious and also some secular thinkers who doubted the claims of a purely secular ethic, and of a categorical imperative rooted in an immense optimism about the moral capacity of unaided reason and science. That pessimism has, in part, proved reasonable. Europe, cradle of Enlightenment, is today the cradle of a postmodern relativism of a most virulent kind. The spirits released from the Pandora's box of the *Lumières* and the *Aufklärung*, and in my own country by Locke and Hume, have proven, in some cases, to be allies to the angels; but in others to be unmistakably from the infernal realms of subversion and enmity. Europe – and I speak here as a European – is in crisis, and believers, who for so long, sometimes rightly, and sometimes cravenly, stood against the Enlightenment project, are called upon today to heal its deep pain. Christians and Muslims, as followers of Europe's two largest religions, must surely work together as never before in finding a remedy. We must also work to ensure that Europe's heart-sickness, expressed today in an almost unrivalled religious indifference, is not exported to the world.

This is, in fact, where I wish to direct my remarks. As a citizen and advocate of the European Union, I find myself part of a tragically Godless society. Recently a sociologist published a book with the title *The Death of Christian Britain*, and this hurts me deeply, because in fact what is dying is the set of monotheistic convictions and a life of prayer and human giving that

as Muslims we wish to see thrive around us. Yet I am also a member of Islam. That combination of the European and the Islamic is one that would be less difficult were Europe to be more faithful to the Christian dimension of its heritage. I prefer to live in a Christian society than in a secular one.

This sense of loss motivates my own particular commitment to the Common Word process. As you are aware, the meeting of this Forum here in Rome is one consequence of the initiative launched a year ago by Muslim scholars who, distressed by the current state of the world, offered a hand of support and goodwill to the spiritual heads of Christendom. My own reason for signing, in addition to the consensus of the document's signatories that the world is in need of healing, and that Muslims are summoned to call mankind to the undying principles of love of God and of neighbour, was that I am particularly distraught by Europe's lack of faith, and the diminution of human dignity and conviviality that surely results.

If, in many inner city areas, and increasingly elsewhere, Muslims live as a significant European constituency, then there is much scope for working together against our continent's current degraded view of human vocation and destiny. And it is my belief that the Holy See's current insistence on the revival of the heritage of religious reason is entirely correct. It is important to recollect that the Catholic Church, as the world's oldest institution, has a long memory which encompasses other, earlier episodes when the prospects seemed dark. St Benedict of Nursia, fifteen hundred years ago, lived during barbarian invasions, which seemed to threaten Europe with a polytheistic relativism, and an inhuman ethic of greed and domination. The remedy, as Benedict saw, and as he lived in the actuality of his life, was the immense power of revealed certainty defended and reinforced by reason.

With its present leadership, the Holy See is well-placed to justify its claims to be a support for true reason. And this places it, as Muslims see matters, in an ideal position for cooperation with Muslims, and surely with others, in the great task of defeating pessimism and the rule of arbitrary opinion.

Islamic theology, we now know, took some of its early methods and categories from Christians such as John Philoponus, whom we knew as Yahya al-Nahwi. Likewise, at key junctures in its own history, Christian Europe has been strengthened by the study of Islamic thinkers. Who can deny the impact of Ibn Rushd, the Shari'a judge of Cordoba, on Europe in the age of St Thomas Aquinas? Or the importance of Ghazali, known to the Latins as Algazel, in his rigorous refutation of the misplaced and sometimes sub-Pagan metaphysics of Avicenna? Or the *mutakallimun*, the Muslim theologians known as 'Loquentes' in the West, whose rigour in the use of reason made them ideal interlocutors, albeit at the distance required by the culture of the time, for the most rigorous of Christian thinkers? As Europe today confronts the new barbarians, who are the postmoderns and other relativists who, not from abroad, are from an evolution of its own inner life, such a convergence can prove a vital asset. Our mutual respect can be based on the practice of shared rational confrontation of Europe's disease.

The need to base our dialogue on ideas is further underlined by the imperative of mission, so salient in both traditions. A mere collaboration on practicalities would risk muffling the theological conversation which is surely close to the heart of any true comparison of the religions' claims.

Of the great European students of Islam in the past century, many of the greatest were faithful Catholics who, following Maritain and the neo-Thomist interest in Arabic philosophy, made profound contributions to our understanding of Muslim theology. Among them we must cite the great Dominican scholars, Georges Anawati and Louis Gardet, whose 1948 manual of

Islamic theology shows the importance of reason to Islamic culture, and the value of detailed comparisons with Thomism. Their Islamic focus was on Hanbalism and Ash'arism. But Maturidism, the third great school of Sunni theology, became the special concern of Josef Van Ess of Tübingen University. Van Ess has reminded us of the Maturidi insistence, present also in Ghazali and his school, on the rationality of God. In his great four-volume history of early Muslim theology, Van Ess stresses Islam's insistence on the divine ground of reason again and again. He even writes this:

Christianity speaks of the "mysteries" of faith; Islam has nothing like that. For Saint Paul, reason belongs to the realm of the "flesh", for Muslims, reason, 'aql, has always been the chief faculty granted human beings by God.¹

Van Ess, and earlier Catholic scholars, have done the world an incalculable service. Secular activists of an earlier generation liked to see Islam as the worshipper of a God of unreason, a legalistic tyrant far removed from human analogy or concern. Often Islam was paired with Judaism, which an older Orientalism chose to see as analogously 'Semitic' in its rejection of Hellenic or any other type of reason. Here, for instance, is Ernest Rénan, the arch-rationalist, writing in 1862:

At the present time, the essential precondition for the spread of European civilization is the destruction of the Semitic thing *par excellence* ... the destruction of Islam ... Islam is the most complete negation of Europe: Islam is fanaticism ... The future, sirs, is therefore Europe's, and Europe's alone ... Here is eternal war, the war which will end only when the last son of Ishmael dies in misery, or is banished through terror to the depths of the desert.² Rénan, hero of the *lumières*, is convinced that Islam and Judaism can have nothing to say to the idea of human dignity. We would add that his understanding of classical Christianity is, of course, hardly more sympathetic.

By the grace of God, we have since moved on, and Muslims need to thank Catholic scholars for having banished older and effectively anti-Semitic categories in favour of an understanding of Islam as a faith in which reasoned belief in a reasonable God is central to serious theology.

Such Catholic scholars have allowed us an image of Islam which converges in key respects with modern Catholic understandings of the inherent dignity of human beings. Shaykh al-Buti has frequently referred to many of the Koranic indicants of this principle. 'We have ennobled the descendents of Adam', says the Koran (17:70). Adam alone is the creature to which God orders the angels themselves to bow down (7:11). This is because God has created within him a spirit which is from God Himself (15:29; 32:9; 38:72). It is thus that our theorists, and particularly the Maturidis and Hanafis, insist that rights are innate in human beings, rather than conferred subsequently in a way that would make them entirely subject to religious confession. I would like to quote, in this connection, the words of Imam Sarakhsi, the Hanafi jurist who died in 1090:

Upon creating human beings, God graciously bestowed upon them intelligence and the capability to carry responsibilities and rights. This was to make them ready for duties and rights determined by God. Then He granted them the right to inviolability, freedom, and property to let them continue their lives so that they can perform the duties they have shouldered. Then these rights to carry responsibility and enjoy rights, freedom, and property exist with a human being when he is born. The insane/child and the sane/adult are the same concerning these rights. This is how the proper personhood is given to him when he is born

for God to charge him with the rights and duties when he is born. In this regard, the insane/child and sane/adult are equal.³

This high regard for the dignity of the human person, in medieval times produced societies where non-Muslim communities flourished for centuries. Naturally the assurance was that certain rights inhered more fully in those who accepted the final revelation of God in the Koran. That assurance was in no way strange for its time, and indeed may be regarded as normative in a certain way of traditional religion. Remember, much more recently, Pope Leo XIII, author of the encyclical *Libertas*, a theologically brilliant meditation on the nature of human dignity. This is his teaching:

Justice therefore forbids, and reason itself forbids, the State to be godless; or to adopt a line of action which would end in godlessness – namely, to treat the various religions (as they call them) alike, and to bestow upon them promiscuously equal rights and privileges.⁴

Muslims, historically, would agree with this teaching. Some continue to do so today. But just as Papal teaching, even on matters of such grave moment, must and does change, so too Muslims must today, as a matter of some urgency, address their own failures in charity towards members of minority religions. But – and here we enter less familiar ground - Muslims are also called, by the same great teaching of the inalienable dignity of man, to press their various governments to respect the rights of Muslims as well. In too many Muslim countries the right of Muslims fully to practice the faith, to wear the garments decreed by tradition in public and educational places, to construct mosques and colleges, and to call freely for the reform of rulers they consider corrupt, is curtailed. Muslims must also, as well as calling for such necessary restorations of the Koranic ideal of the dignity and honour of the Adamic creature in countries where they form a majority, stand in solidarity with Muslims who live in parts of Europe where the rise of a new pagan tribalism is making life for the Muslim faithful intolerable. We know, and receive with respect and gratitude, the commitment of Catholic clergy and faithful, to overcome the many disadvantages faced by Muslim believers in Europe, most particularly in municipalities which are controlled by far-right political formations.

I have returned, as is evident, to my theme of the tragedy of Europe. I have already indicated my belief that, as supporters of the People of the Book, we lament Europe's spiritual crisis, and wish the Churches well in their struggle to heal it. I call to mind the writing of the Catholic conscience of Belgium, Jacques Neiryck. In his novel *The Siege of Brussels (Le siège de Bruxelles)*, Neiryck depicts a nightmarish future in which chauvinism has brought about the persecution and expulsion of Belgium's hated Muslim minority; but he closes by showing how the humane mainstream voices in Islam and Christianity will ultimately prevail. My own confidence is that cooperation and mutual respect will, indeed, triumph against barbarism.

I turn now to an internal Muslim argument. Some Muslims appear to believe that this convivial, moral interaction and mutual support on issues of social concern must be detached from an attention to theology. In some cases one even hears the thought that Christianity, rooted in a belief in human sinfulness, is mistrustful of the intellect, and that its doctrines are based in a mere leap of faith. This is then contrasted with Islam which, such thinkers aver, is pre-eminently the religion of reason and of a reasonable God. One finds such perceptions in the polemics of Rashid Rida and his still very considerable school. One hears it also among less cultivated Muslims. But it is clear from any study of Catholic doctrine that natural reason is central to the Catholic intellectual enterprise. This surely means that the claim that our cooperation should be merely pragmatic, not principial, is gravely misguided. It is time that

Muslims welcome cooperation with Catholics in an awareness that Catholicism, like Islam, speaks the universal language of reason.

Once this is achieved, there is much more to be achieved. Together, Muslims and Catholic Christians account for over two and a half billion souls: considerably over a third of the planet's population. The *Common Word* document stresses, from its scriptural perspective, the need not only to affirm the shared abstract principles of love of God and of neighbour, but to show the sincerity of our commitment in pastoral action. The two principles are in fact symbiotic.

We know that ours is a time of challenges to our relationship. There are Muslims, and there are Christians, who wish that our gathering here had not taken place. The *Common Word* has been condemned by some Muslim voices; and some Christians have expressed their alienation from the warm and positive Christian responses which have come from Yale, Lambeth Palace, and other centres of the Christian conscience. In some places our relationship is improving; in others it seems to be suffering from an intractable deficiency. The commandment to love God and love neighbour, which is in practice a single commandment, is not always obeyed in practice and in our hearts. There is a valid Christian fear of Muslim extremism. And there is undeniably a Muslim fear of what Hans Küng, in his book on Islam, calls America's 'aggressive imperialistic foreign policy',⁵ driven, as some see it, by Christian nationalists among whom, as he says, 'the crusade mentality is currently being revived.'⁶ We both need to acknowledge the Other's fear of us.

As Muslims, called to be open-hearted towards the founders of all three Abrahamic faiths, we are particularly pained by such tensions. The *Common Word* initiative is one expression of that pain. But we must move forward. And one admirable advocate of this has been His Eminence Cardinal Tauran, in his message for the end of Ramadan, issued six weeks ago. He entitles his letter: *Christians and Muslims: together for the dignity of the family*. Here the cardinal commends past solidarity among Muslims and Catholics in the great task of defending this elemental institution of society, and prays for further collaboration in the future.

I believe that His Eminence is entirely correct, and that he has identified one of the most important areas in which our shared commitment to human dignity can find practical expression. Muslims and Catholics alike, to the scorn of secular commentators, courageously uphold an image of marriage as the proper context for the expression of human sexuality. His Holiness Pope Benedict, in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, has in a timely fashion reminded the world of the dignity and holiness of human sexual desire. The erotic should be part of our spirituality, not a delation from it. The due context for this vital aspect of our dignity as incarnated beings is manifestly matrimony. And here, Muslims and Catholics will wish to differ from a certain reductionist tendency in contemporary culture to assume that men and women are different in ways that are only socially conditioned, rather than alternate, but equally valuable, expressions of aspects of the power of the One who has created humanity in the image of the Divine.

Let us borrow, in an analogising way, an insight from the Trinitarian theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Here the Swiss genius-theologian draws our attention to the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. He writes: 'The hypostatic modes of being constitute for each other the greatest opposition we could think of [...] precisely so that the most intimate interpenetration we could think of becomes possible.'⁷ And, defying the impoverished modern view of gender, he goes on to identify the giving and taking of the persons of the Trinity in frankly gendered terms: the masculine principle identified with the fecundating, dynamic role, and the feminine with the receptive and the florescent.⁸ Such a validation of

classical Christian understandings of the mutuality of the genders in family life is clearly close, in its outcomes, to Muslim assurances; although the Trinitarian language about the inner life of God is undeniably far from Islamic faith. Shared conclusions about the value of 'alternative sexualities' will surely follow.

Another area where we have already worked together to good effect is indicated in Archbishop Rowan Williams's splendid and detailed response to the *Common Word*. He points to the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as 'at or near the top of the list of issues that concern both Christians and Muslims all over the world'. Muslims are convinced that the Apostolic See, concerned for the Catholic and other communities of Jerusalem, will stand in solidarity with Christian and Muslim believers who, while renouncing cruel and arbitrary terroristic responses, stand courageously for their right to dignity in their own land. Muslims have been immensely heartened by the courage of many Christians, such as former American president Jimmy Carter, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town, in condemning what they describe as Israel's apartheid policies against the Muslim and Christian communities of the occupied territories. It has been rightly said that upholding the dignity of the Palestinian people is the surest path to Muslim hearts, and we are confident that the Vatican will remember this as it attempts to advocate a peaceful and just solution for Jews, Muslims and Christians alike in the Holy Land.

But there are other places in God's earth where human dignity is being outraged. It is not right for Muslims, including Arab Muslims, to call attention to the plight of the Palestinians, and to pay less attention to the victims of the current atrocities in Darfur. That scandal needs to be urgently explained and addressed. And even more recently, the tragedy in Eastern Zaire is summoning us all to joint action. One recalls, with reassurance, the good relations which were so frequently maintained between Catholics and Muslims in neighbouring Rwanda, even at the height of the appalling events of the early 1990s.

Such calamities which disfigure God's earth are a summons, and a judgement. We have not always been agents of God's peace. It is surely a source of discomfort for us to learn that the twentieth century's most celebrated man of peace, Gandhi, was neither a Muslim nor a Christian. And as a European, citizen of a continent which is proud of its monotheistic heritage, I continue to be desolated by the memory of the wars of the past century, which outstripped both in scale and ferocity those of any other continent.

We are called, it is evident, to prove to the world that we are a force for good. The modern crisis of faith is all too often triggered by a sense that religion yields the bitter fruit of enmity and even conflict. Our most urgent task, then, as we seek to recover our place as defenders of human dignity and mutual respect, is to show, in practice, and not only in words, that we can cooperate together for the common good. Natural disasters, seemingly so prominent in our environmentally troubled times, offer an obvious field for common labour, and one follows with delight the progress of the cooperation between CAFOD and Islamic Relief, after the historic Memorandum of Understanding which they signed in 2003, in which they pledge support for each other's activities in emergency work.⁹ Islamic Relief and Christian Aid are also, in my own country, sending joint Muslim-Christian teams to areas of southern Africa, in a pilot scheme which holds the promise of further and more systematic cooperation. And at the enormous Cut the Carbon Rally in Birmingham, on August 21 2007, Christian Aid, and several Muslim charities, demonstrated the healing power of a public event which announces to the world that its environmental suffering can be healed by interreligious cooperation, pooling energy and resources to tackle a problem that is too large for the agencies of one faith alone.

The global famine that seems to come ever closer, prompted, perhaps, by the rise in biofuel consumption, is already creating lethal competition for scarce resources in many Third World countries. Deaths from hunger are increasingly reported, and small producers too are suffering. In India, figures show that an appalling 166,000 farmers have committed suicide since 1997.¹⁰ Our shared wisdom regarding just distribution, compassion for the needy, the evils of usury, and a political struggle on behalf of the oppressed, should surely be put to use in a joint campaign, in the name of our father Abraham, to defend those who suffer in this way.

This should be particularly our duty and burden. Both Islam and Catholicism are in Europe. But neither should claim a privileged relationship with that continent, for fear of relegating others to a secondary status. Both of our traditions have substantial roots in Asia and Africa. Asia is, in one sense, the privileged continent, the continent of the spirit, as Heaven has made it the birthplace of all the major religions. Today many parts of it thrive, but in others, human dignity is suffering grievously. And in Africa, now a continent shared intimately between Islam and Christianity, we are also called to work together for what we hold in common. Jesus and Muhammad were not only champions of the poor, they lived among the poor, and will surely be resurrected among them. That is a vital aspect of their brotherhood and of ours. If we live in privilege, taking vain pride in our titles and garments, but fail to work with our own hands and hearts for those whose livelihoods are precarious, then we will have betrayed the Abrahamic principle of submission to God's will, which is that we be ready to sacrifice even what is most precious to us, unhesitatingly, with full hearts for God's sake.

The words of the Koran are summoning and reproaching us all:

Have you seen the one who denies religion?

It is he who pushes away the orphan,

And who does not urge the feeding of the poor.

So woe to those who worship,

Who are absent-minded in their prayer;

Those who make a show of themselves,

And refuse neighbourly assistance.

(Sura 107)

[1] Josef Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 153-4.

[2] Ernest Rénan, *De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l'histoire de la civilisation, discours d'ouverture du cours de langue hébraïque, chaldaïque et syriaque au Collège de France* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1862), 27-8.

[3] Cited in Recep Sentürk, 'Minority Rights in Islam: From Dhimmi to Citizen', in Shireen

T. Hunter and Huma Malik (eds.), *Islam and Human Rights: Advancing a US-Muslim Dialogue* (Washington DC: Center for International and Strategic Studies, 2005, 67-99, p.74.

[4] Pope Leo XIII, *Libertas*, 21.

[5] Hans Küng, *Islam* (Oxford, 2007), p.453.

[6] Küng, p.311.

[7] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama II*, 258, cited in Rowan Williams, 'Balthasar and the Trinity', 37-50 of Edward T. Oakes SJ and David Moss (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge, 2004), see p. 41.

[8] *Theo-drama V*, cited in Rowan Williams, 'Balthasar and the Trinity', 45.

[9] www.cafod.org.uk/partnership/other-faiths

[10] Randeep Ramesh, *The Guardian*, 1 March 2008.

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