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Dialogue among Civilizations and the World of Islam

In the Name of Allah

The year 2001, which has been confirmed and approved by the world as the 'Year of Dialogue among Civilizations', has certain important and noteworthy messages. Perhaps there are few topics that are accepted and embraced by the world as this has been. What follows, therefore, is a brief summary of the debate over this topic:

- 1. The eager approval of this suggestion indicates humanity's pressing need for dialogue and understanding.
- 2. This idea, its delineation and approval, are presented at a time when we have put behind us a century of war, turmoil, usurpation, discrimination and terror. Fortunately, in these entanglements and wars, not only has the world of Islam not played any role, but rather in many instances it has itself been a victim of wars and aggressions. The two world wars have been the bloodiest of the present grievous state. These two wars occurred in the West, at the hands of Westerners. The infringements on the rights of human beings throughout the world have occurred outside the world of Islam.

The rights of the peoples of the continents of Asia, Africa and South America, especially the oppressed people of Palestine, have been trampled upon. This inequality has been imposed even upon non–Muslim countries, which were not among industrial nations. With this description, at the end of a century full of blood, war and turmoil, the onset of the third Christian millennium, under the umbrella of 'Dialogue and Understanding', augurs a brighter and more promising future for the mankind.

3. Most important of all, this idea, which has been embraced by the world, was outlined by Muslims. This is testimony to the self-confidence and self-belief of the Islamic world and Muslim nations, especially in the second half of the twentieth century.

The proponent of 'Dialogue among Civilizations' is himself an heir to a strong civilization and culture. He understands relations between human beings to be comprised not of might and imposition, but of rationality and dialogue. One who values wisdom and has founded his own life on the basis of rationality, which is the origin of wisdom, speaks 'Dialogue among Civilizations'. We believe in rationality and dialogue. Religion and history have taught us this lesson. It was Muslims who familiarized Westerners with their history of philosophy and civics.

The transfer of Greek science, philosophy and wisdom first occurred as a result of Europeans' familiarity with Muslims. Europeans learned tolerance from us. It is now ironic that they suggest the moral value of tolerance to us. The great Western civilization is strongly indebted to Islamic civilization. The world of Islam is endowed with a great civilization. Most assuredly, however, there exists a great distance between our civilization and our present state.

4. 'Dialogue among Civilizations' means equality between peoples and nations. In other words, one conducts a dialogue only when one respects the other party and considers the other party as equal to oneself. The colonial relationship which has ruled over certain parts of the world in the past two or three centuries has been the result of the phenomenon of dividing peoples and nations into first– and second-class citizens: that is, nations which have an inherent right to be masters, and nations which are inferior and have no choice but to be followers.

War arises from the phenomenon of one party giving itself a greater right and, because he has power, he is entitled to serve his own interests at any cost, even at the cost, of war. Such a war is the fruit of discrimination and injustice. However, as soon as one proposes 'Dialogue among Civilizations', and it is accepted, it means that equality between nations has been accepted, and this is a great achievement for humanity.

5. Presently, by relying on many common elements, we Muslims must make a sincere effort to reduce differences, because a notable portion of our existing differences arises from differences in religious jurisprudence, culture, and the meaning of words, which can be eliminated. People who have not wanted the unity of the world of Islam have imposed other difficulties or, if the plan did not originate with them, they have at least taken advantage of already existing differences by aggravating them.

Thus, it is possible to eliminate differences, except for those, which are natural, for people are by nature different; we do not all think alike, and we do not have identical interpretations. Therefore, in light of agreements and numerous common elements, we can minimize differences and render them a means to perfection and progress. Similar thoughts never confront each other. To have two ways of thinking set against each other is not only problem–free, but they ought to confront each other, for this causes the evolution and perfection of the thought.

What is important is that the dichotomy of thoughts not turns into disagreements, contradiction,

aggression and war. In order to achieve this, we must first return to the roots of unity, and, secondly, we must understand that if we wish to hold a dialogue, we must be inclined to wisdom and rationality.

6. One of the plagues, which can be found in religious societies, and unfortunately the world of Islam has at times been plagued by it, is the misconception that, with the existence of religion, man does not require reason. That is, to believe that one can have either reason or religion, oblivious to the fact that one *can* understand even religion through reason.

Does any mental tool exist other than reason? The difference between having faith and not having faith is not that a man without faith uses his reason, while a religious person is not in need of reason-they equally require the power of reason and must use it. The difference lies in the fact that a man of faith possesses two books while a man without faith, one book. The source of the religious man's knowledge is greater, and thus his achievements are richer.

But a man who does not believe in God and inspiration possesses only the Book of Nature, to which he refers with the aid of his reason. A religious maxi also has this book and, as a natural human being, through the aid of his reason, he studies nature, acquires knowledge, comprehends science and philosophy, while, in addition, he benefits from yet another Book, the Book of Divine Law and Inspiration. People *who* set religion against reason understand their flawed interpretations to be 'religion'.

It *is* true that inspiration lies beyond time and space, however, we exist in time and space. Our understanding, therefore, belongs to the realm of time and space. Thus, our understanding of the Book of Creation and Divine Laws is also limited to time and space. In this way, knowledge evolves. At one time, men of knowledge have one understanding, while at another time their understanding evolves, or perhaps the former understanding is even negated and replaced by our present understanding.

Although man is endowed with a divine spirit and it benefits from dimensions that are beyond nature, beyond time and space, a large portion of his love, feelings and thoughts are nevertheless subject to time and space. Thus a great portion of our understanding of the Book of God is limited to time and space. Those who consider their understanding of God, the Book of God, and religion to be identical with 'religion', with the passage of time they are still not prepared to change their view. As a result, they sacrifice reason to their own understanding, which is limited to time and space. If we Muslims wish to have a better future and build a prosperous life for ourselves and a model for humanity that is proportional to the Greatness of God and the message of the Prophet, we must rely on God's great blessing–reason.

7. Our identity is rooted in the past; however, this does not mean that we should return to the past. The revelation of God descended on us in the past, but it does not belong to only one time. We must refer to the past, because the roots of our identity lie in the past, but we must not remain in the past, for this would be a retreat. A reverting to the past is to find a springboard from which we may forge ahead to the

future.

8. In order to move ahead to the future we must understand the world and benefit from all positive achievements of human thought and civilization, wherever they may be. It is only under such circumstances that we can renew the greatness and grandeur of the past and, proportional to our present and future, shape a life which is blessed with God–like attributes and inspiration, a life in which at the same time human reason and human rights are held in respect.

9. One of the other blights is a situation where religion and freedom oppose one another. In the Middle Ages, religion was held against reason and freedom-and both suffered. Today, in liberal systems, freedom exists, but a freedom devoid of spirituality, and apart from the spiritual dimension of human life. As a consequence, their contemporary life faces many difficulties, which are admitted by Westerners themselves.

Religion without freedom is tantamount to a life of enslavement, a life in which man is devoid of honor. Religion must not be set against reason and freedom. Rather, religion is a cradle and support for the growth of reason, freedom and liberality. God's religion has taught us this lesson. By relying on these standards and many other factors, we must become prepared for a 'Dialogue among Civilizations' and convey to the world the latent grandeur of the foundations of our religion and civilization.

10. With an open embrace, we must benefit from the positive aspects of other civilizations and cultures. This is in the sense of adopting, and adopting is a human art. This is adopting where man has understood his past and his identity, has founded his life on wisdom and reason, and puts to good use what others have already achieved. This is quite different from mere unseemly imitation.

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