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RENEWAL AND RENAISSANCE
Towards a New World Order

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by

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Professor Nizami, Director of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies; Distinguished guests; Ladies and Gentlemen; In this month of July, exactly five hundred years ago, a navigator by the name of Vasco da Gama set out from Europe on a mission "in search of Christians and spices". His long and dangerous journey outflanking Islamic control of trade with the East, would take him round a continent of Africa that represented not much more to him than an obstacle between Europe and Asia, and possibly the home of Prester John, the mythical Christian King who, it was believed, would "help fight the infidel".

The southern tip of Africa - from whence I come today to share with you some reflections on our joint past and our common future - still bears the imprint of the mission, in names like Natal and Algoa Bay and Deletoa Bay. Long after Europe had discarded the myth of Prester John he lived on in the minds of settlers who followed Da Gama, and of their descendants - unable, for example, to contemplate the magnificent Zimbabwean civilisation as a product of Africa.

The whole world bears a more profound imprint. The voyages of Da Gama and his contemporaries were strands in the grand tapestry of the Western European Renaissance. The expansion of European influence and domination over virtually the entire planet was a central aspect of European ambition in that period of European history. Thus was the foundation of a world economic system forged.

Juxtaposing the artistic, intellectual, scientific and technological achievements of the Western European Renaissance with some of the effects of the voyages of exploration, reminds us of the maxim of a later writer, who said that cultural treasures owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil and suffering of their contemporaries, often in distant places.

For those who could not match the military, economic and social power of Europe during this period of expansion, the consequences were adverse, and often disastrous. That included the Islamic world, in particular that part of it which was African and that part which enjoyed thriving and productive relations with Africa. The Nineteenth Century colonisation of the African Continent was in many respects the culmination of the Renaissance-initiated expansion of European dominion over the planet. The effects on the colonised continent are too well known to need repetition.

Yet, as it has been said, the purpose of studying history is not to deride human action, nor to weep over it or to hate it, but to understand it. And hopefully then to learn from it as we contemplate our future.

Today, I come here as an African, as the guest of a Centre that is devoted to the study of Islam, in a European institution of excellence. And I come to pose the question whether our generation has the capacity to close the circle on these five centuries.

Can we say with confidence that it is within our each to declare that never again shall continents, countries or communities be reduced to the smoking battlefields of contending forces of nationality, religion, race or language?

Shall we rise to the challenge which history has put before us, of ensuring that the world's prodigious capacity for economic growth benefits all its people and not just the powerful? Will future generations say of us: Indeed, they did lay the foundations for the eradication of world poverty; they succeeded in establishing a new world order based on mutual respect, partnership and equity?

Ladies and gentlemen

I am most grateful to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies for the invitation to share ideas with you. When da Gama finally reached the Indian Ocean, he found navigators there far more competent than himself to guide his expedition, and wisely he relied on them in the same way that I know that I am following where others have opened the way, and that we are amongst those from who we have much to learn.

What encourages me to add my humble contribution, is the Centre's commitment to the promotion of understanding, tolerance and co-operation as essential conditions for advancing the welfare of all. I am emboldened by a desire that the presence of Africa should be felt in the intellectual quest the Centre seeks to foster. As we break free from a bi-polar view of the world, the centuries-old discourse about relations between Islam and the West is also naturally giving way to a more multifaceted framework of thought.

Africa, more than any other continent, has had to contend with the consequences of conquest in a denial of its own role in history, including the denial that its people had the capacity to bring about change and progress.

Today the world knows better. The mists that obscured our vision have all but lifted. With independence regained, we have had the opportunity to recover our history. A clearer understanding of Africa's past has been emerging, a past in which the continent's internal dynamic has interacted with the rest of the world in a two-way process.

We are better able now to distinguish between the effects of external interventions and factors from within, in contributing to the continent's present situation; to compute the benefits as well as the negative effects of interaction with others; and to take pride in what others have drawn from the continent.

In short, we have the opportunity to see our African identity as the product of our own engagement in world history. This allows us to reflect on the contribution Africa can make,

through the reconstruction of our countries and the rebirth of our continent, to the creation of a new world order that matches the challenge of eradicating world poverty and insecurity.

In the recovery of Africa's history there is also a better understanding of the role of religion in that history; and of the contribution it has made, and could make, to the continent's rebirth.

Today Islam and Christianity represent major religions in Africa, with Islam in fact the majority religion on the continent. These are not alien presences but African religions. They are part of Africa's identity because they were not merely acquired in interaction with the world, but we also transformed what was external in origin and made it part of Africa. In doing so we have also changed these religions.

Islam has become part of Africa in a process as complex as the history of the continent itself. In some areas it was through military conquest; in many others - including parts of Southern Africa - along the arteries of trade; and also - as in South Africa - through the actions of colonial powers circumventing the refusal of the colonised to submit to wage-labour. I may add that Robben Island's first political prisoner, and one of the founding fathers of Islam in South Africa, was one of several exiled leaders of resistance to colonial rule in South-East Asia.

If the language of Islam in Africa has been Arabic, it has also been indigenous African Languages. The coming of Islam sometimes meant the imposition of new political and social order, but also the absorption of Islam into an existing order.

African Muslim polities shared the ambivalence of other states and religions towards the colonial slave trade, protecting believers from the violation of their fundamental rights but also complicit in the trade in human lives.

In the face of European colonialism, Islamic communities took their place along the whole spectrum of resistance politics, including the struggle against apartheid.

If I may, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to those South African Muslims who died while in detention because of their resistance to apartheid; Babla Saloojee; Imam Haroun; Ahmed Timol; and Dr Hussein Hafferjee. They represent the involvement of the Muslim community in the struggle for justice and freedom, as does the presence of Muslims as Cabinet Ministers and in the highest office of our judiciary, in the new democratic political dispensation of our country.

Though there have been times in history of our continent when religion has inflamed tension and conflict, rather than eased it, there has generally been a notable degree of religious tolerance. In this vast and complex process, Islam has enriched and become part of Africa. In turn Islam was

transformed and Africa became part of it. African centres of learning served not only as a path for the absorption of the doctrine of Islam, but also contributed to the development of broader Islamic learning.

Ladies and gentlemen;

If we dwell on these matters it is because an acknowledgement of our own heritage is essential to the forging of new identities, as nations and as a continent. The recovery of our history is both a precursor of renewal and is promoted by it.

In this sense, the birth of a new South African nation, like the rebirth of our continent, has been a long time in the making. Indeed, it has been in progress from the beginning of the conquest. In reality resistance, and the aspiration towards independence regained, have never died, even when they seemed to have been silenced.

By bringing apartheid to an end - with the support of the whole international community - the people of South Africa have created conditions that are favourable for realising our vision of a new society based on justice and mutual respect. non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy.

Such a project requires a total transformation of our society with the central objective of addressing the legacy of our divided and oppressive past. The ultimate test of our success will be the extent to which we manage to create a better life for all, and more especially for the poor. This is a project which requires the simultaneous achievement of legitimate government; sustained economic growth in order to bring about socio-economic improvement; and the reconciliation of formerly divided sectors of society.

Being latecomers to freedom and democracy, we have the benefit of the experience of others. Through them, we understand that formal political rights will remain an empty shell and democracy fragile, without real improvement in the lives of people and without an all-inclusive approach that reconciles the beneficiaries of the old order with those who seek improvement from the new.

Under the new conditions, in which all are included and equal rights are accorded to all the religions, all the languages and all the cultures of our diverse society, what was once used to divide us and weaken us is becoming a source of unity and strength.

Thus South Africa's vibrant Islamic heritage is a valued and respected part of our nation. It is contributing to the forging of a new South African identity. Democratic South Africa, unlike its predecessor, accords Islam equal constitutional status with all other religions. Muslim marriages are now recognised.

The religious and cultural ties that nourished solidarity in struggle, are today strengthening partnerships for peace and prosperity between South Africa and countries in the Gulf and the Levant, in North Africa and South-East Asia.

The stability thus achieved and the harnessing of all our nation's energies, have provided the conditions to turn economic stagnation into growth and to pursue our principal mandate, the improvement of living conditions for all our citizens.

Building a new nation out of the divided and oppressive legacy of the old, is a protracted process and full of challenges. But we can say with confidence that the foundations have been solidly laid.

The lessons we have learned from the experience of others are the common property of our age. What is being achieved in South Africa is part of a process sweeping across the continent. In the same way that the liberation of South Africa from apartheid was an achievement of Africa, the reconstruction and development of our country is part of the rebirth of the continent.

Ladies and gentlemen;

It is now common knowledge that the first decades of political independence did little to free Africa from underdevelopment or instability. Indeed in many respects the situation worsened further still.

As the world frees itself from the dominance of bi-polar power the stark division of the world's people into rich and poor comes all the more clearly into view. And within that division Sub-Saharan Africa occupies the most extreme position.

However, a new trend has set in, whatever the precise combination of reasons - the failure of development; the ending of the Cold War; the liberation of South Africa from apartheid, and others. As Africa takes stock of the past three decades, her people are opting in the most practical ways for the peaceful resolution of conflict; the entrenchment of democracy and the pursuit of policies conducive to economic growth.

During this decade already democratic elections have been held in more than 25 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. Others, including the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, are in transition towards democracy. In this spirit the Organisation of African Unity reacted to developments in Sierra Leone by voicing the continent's rejection of military coups and calling for urgent transition to civilian rule.

The average growth of GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa in 1995 was three times the average of less than 1,5% in the previous three years. This reflects economic reform that emphasises disciplined

use of public resources and partnership between government and the private sector in pursuit of growth and development. It provides a basis for still higher rates of growth.

These are but the outward signs of a profound change coursing through the continent, one that makes the last decade of this century as significant as the period of independence from colonialism. A part of that change is Africa's response to the imperatives of the global economy.

The development of regional economic associations is providing the framework for co-operative approaches to the development of infrastructure and the creation of larger markets. Combined with massive investment in technology and the enhancement of skills, this boosts Africa's competitiveness in securing a share of global investment resources.

What is of equal importance, in boosting the flow of investment into Africa, is that it should bring benefit to the people of Africa. It should bring employment; the transfer of technology and the enhancement of skills; and lasting development of African productive capacity and of the African business sector.

It would be a cruel irony of history if Africa's actions to regenerate the continent were to unleash a new scramble for Africa which, like that of the nineteenth century, plundered the continent's wealth and left it once more the poorer.

The pooling of sovereignty in the consolidation of regional economic associations, as building blocs of an African Economic Union, will help make Africa's voice heard in the capitals of a world increasingly defined by regional blocs within the global economy.

The process also adds strength to relations being established - and in some cases re-established - with other regions and continents at similar stages of development and with similar interests, as they too define their place in the emerging world order - in Asia to the East of the African continent and in Latin America to the West.

These relations in turn reinforce the efforts of the nations of the South to secure a reform of international institutions as part of a restructuring of economic, social and political relations. That would include, amongst others, the reform of the United Nations so that it should conform to the demands of the current age.

The objective of such restructuring is to achieve a world order based on partnership and mutual respect, in which the benefits of collective human endeavour accrue to all and in which the imbalances of the past and their legacy are redressed.

The objective is to eradicate poverty and the attendant social ills from a world with the immense productive capacity that was unleashed in part by those voyages of exploration five centuries ago.

Ladies and gentlemen;

South Africa, and Africa, will not succeed in isolation from Asia and Latin America, precisely because we are now all expressly part of a single humanity.

The renewal of nations; the rebirth of continents and the emergence of a new world order are each processes in their own right. But they are also today part of a single transformation of historical significance.

Believe in the possibility of change and renewal is perhaps one of the defining characteristics of politics and of religions.

There have been other times when humanity believed that it was poised to enter a new era defined by the achievement of shared ideals.

The establishment of the United Nations and the beginning of decolonisation was such a time. Few would have imagined fifty years ago that the closing years of this century would see so much of humanity still homeless, hungry, illiterate and in poor health, so many lives still blighted by insecurity stemming from violent conflict.

Few would have thought that the political ideals universally acknowledged and those core religious values of tolerance, respect for the individual, justice and concern for the poor, would still be denied to so many.

Few would have imagined that stability and security would continue to be under threat because so little has been done to reverse the growing gap between rich and poor.

As we enter the new millennium, as we strive to close that circle started five centuries ago, as we embark upon the regeneration of the much neglected continent of Africa to take its full place in the emerging new world order, can we join hands in a partnership for justice and peace? And can we again call upon the great spiritual values to help inspire humanity to rise to the best potential in itself, and this time truly to achieve those shared ideals for a better world for all its inhabitants?

Ladies and gentlemen;

When the Prophet Muhammad sent his oppressed followers to the African Christian King Negus of Abyssinia for safety, and they received his protection, was that not an example of tolerance and co-operation to be emulated today? Is that not a profound pointer to the role that religion can play, and the spiritual leadership it can provide, in bringing about the social renewal on our

continent and in the world?

Africa's history has been profoundly shaped also by the interplay between three great religious traditions - Islam, Christianity and African traditional religions. As it faces the new millennium, the conduct of this religious heritage may very well again be decisive in determining how Africa meets the challenges of the future.

As in the new global order no country, region or continent, can any longer operate in isolation from the rest of the world. No social movement in any country or continent can isolate itself from similar movements co-existing with it. This would apply to religion as much as anything else living in a society.

The way in which these three great religions of Africa interact and co-operate with one another, could have a profound bearing on the social space we create for the rebirth of our continent. The relationship of Islam and Christianity to one another and of those two to African traditional religion, may be pertinent aspects of this process. How Islam (and Christianity, for that matter) relates to African traditional religion presents a particular challenge to its followers all over Africa. It represents a call to Muslims to harness the more inclusive strands in their own theological heritage in order to contribute to a more humane Africa, acknowledging the humanity of those traditions that are unique to the continent.

As with other aspects of its heritage, African traditional religion is increasingly recognised for its contribution to the world. No longer seen as despised superstition which had to be superseded by superior forms of belief; today its enrichment of humanity's spiritual heritage is acknowledged. The spirit of Ubuntu that profound African sense that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings - is not a parochial phenomenon, but has added globally to our common search for a better world.

The nature of interaction between the strands of our religious heritage could help lay solid foundations for the establishment of a world order based on mutual respect, partnership and equity. On a continent battling the scourge of underdevelopment, AIDS, ecological disaster and poverty, competition amongst religions will be utterly misplaced. Tolerance and co-operation, on the other hand, will give the moral leadership so gravely needed.

If I may conclude with one more reference to the experience of our own country during the struggle against apartheid. The strength of inter-religious solidarity in action against apartheid, rather than mere harmony or co-existence, was critical in bringing that evil system to an end. This approach, rather than verbally competing claims, enabled each tradition to bring its best forward and place it at the service of all. I am confident that the religions of our continent will walk a similar path in the reconstruction and renewal of our continent. And in that way we shall

play our full role in the creation of the new world order.

Ladies and gentlemen;

I wish to once more thank the Centre for Islamic Studies for providing me with this opportunity to exchange ideas with such an illustrious audience. I am grateful for the opportunity to express in a practical way my appreciation of the Centre's efforts to promote co-operation and understanding.

I leave from here rejuvenated, confident that we do have the capacity to embark on this shared new voyage of exploration into the next millennium, seeking to build a new world order from which all nations and people shall benefit equally.

Thank You!