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ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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by

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Secretary of State
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Pro Vice Chancellor, Director of the Centre, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The international reputation which the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies enjoys today is a credit to the Muslim communities in Britain and abroad which have long supported it. I can think of no better venue for a discussion about the ways in which Western and Islamic cultures interact. We each bring our own experience to this theme. Much of my own experience derives from twenty-two years as MP for Blackburn, a town which has long been a melting-pot of different cultures and faiths. The arrival of thousands of Irish Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth century was followed by Eastern Europeans and others in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. More recently, Blackburn has become one of the chief centres of the Muslim communities in the Northwest of England. It has no fewer than twenty-three mosques. I am proud to represent the interests of my 25,000 Muslim constituents in Parliament, as well as 75,000 who are mainly white, Christian, Catholic, Protestant, or, as some would say, of 'no religion'.

Yet the more I understand about different faiths and denominations, the more I am struck by how much each of us is the product of our own religious, cultural, and intellectual background. As John Maynard Keynes put it in a slightly different context, 'Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.'

The same goes for religion. Those who claim to see religious faith as anachronistic in a modern, secular age, forget just how much supposedly 'value-free' systems of thought are conditioned by the faith of past and present ages. So none of us is qualified to give a truly impartial account of our own or of other cultures. Each of us sees through the prism of our own experience, and this inevitably distorts our vision.

Our challenge, as thinking, rational people, is to acknowledge that our view is partial, and to do what we can to sweep away prejudice and misconception. This is not just a theoretical or an academic task. Indeed, a better cultural understanding may for some be literally a matter of life and death. September 11, and world events in the months since that day, have resurrected many of the old distorted images.

Some in the West point to the atrocities in the United States, link them with suicide bombings in Israel, abuse of women and minorities in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, memories of the fatwa on Salman Rushdie, and the calls to arms of extremist Muslim clerics, and, in doing so, paint a distorted and selective picture of Islam as a violent threat. In reality, the picture is much more complex.

Meanwhile, a similar process is in operation in the Islamic world, with some people all too ready to caricature Western culture as subversive and Godless. Some link pernicious anti-Jewish rhetoric with memories of every conflict in which Christians and Muslims have fought on opposing sides, right back to the Crusades, to produce fantasies of a Judaeo-Christian conspiracy against Muslims everywhere.

It has, then, never been more important for people of goodwill, of whatever faith or nation, to promote a more accurate understanding of this crucial cultural interface. We have an obligation to substitute knowledge for ignorance, and understanding for suspicion.

We should begin by promoting a closer reading of our shared history. It is often forgotten that the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, share many common roots. Britain, and the West generally owe a great deal of their culture and civilization to the Islamic world. Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, Islam linked the heritage of Greek philosophers and Indian mathematicians, and made a vital contribution of its own to many fields of intellectual life—science, astronomy, medicine, history, law, architecture and mathematics. ‘Algebra’ itself is an Arabic word.

Islam is part of our past and our present, in all fields of human endeavour. It has helped to forge modern Europe, from the wonders of Islamic Granada in the Middle Ages to Ottoman-ruled Sarajevo in the nineteenth century, where Muslims and Jews, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians lived side by side in an atmosphere of tolerance unknown elsewhere in Europe at the time.

We in Western countries sometimes congratulate ourselves on the tolerance of our societies today. We attribute this to the rise of a secular society, contrasting this with the apparently dominant role of religion in Islamic countries. Here again, we would benefit from a closer look at the reality. To underline a point I made earlier, Western countries are not as secular as we sometimes like to think. Our laws and systems of thought have deep roots in Judaeo-Christian tradition. Though our societies are sometimes described as post-Christian, that is not the same as saying they are non-Christian. England still has an established Church, of which the Queen is the head—‘By the Grace of God’. When I was Home Secretary in the last Parliament, one of my more surprising official tasks was the swearing in of new Bishops in the Church of England.

Nor is the UK alone in giving the Church a privileged role. Both Germany and Sweden, for example, have formal linkages between Church and State, and in many European countries there are important political parties called Christian Democrats or Christian Socialists. The roles of Church and State were closely intertwined in the early days of Ireland’s independence under Eamon de Valera. European dictatorships in the 1930s were careful to act in the name of religion when they could. Even in the United States, where secularism itself is held to be virtually sacred

in the public education system, every dollar bill still bears the words 'In God We Trust', and church attendance is high.

Although, in the UK, church attendance figures have been in decline for generations, many people in this country still feel, at some deep level, reassured that the Church is there. It was not at all surprising that many people who had not been for years still felt moved to attend church in the midst of their shock on that first Sunday after September .

But if the West is not as secular as we often assume, nor is the Islamic world inimical to the values we think of as 'secular', 'democratic', or indeed 'Western'.

In many ways, Islam has often been an egalitarian and progressive force. The Prophet himself ran the early Muslim community according to shura, or consultation. Islam was centuries ahead of Western societies in giving rights, such as the right of divorce, to women. Many strains of Islam have always rejected the emergence of a religious hierarchy, stressing instead the direct relationship between the individual and God. As such, in some authoritarian states in the Islamic world, religion has become a challenge to authority, not an oppressive force.

This may seem surprising to some in the West. But the same was true in the West in the Middle Ages. One of the slogans of the Peasants' Revolt in fourteenth-century England was the riddle posed by Priest John Ball: 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?' The idea that people could read the Bible for themselves in the vernacular was long resisted as being too dangerous. William Tyndale, who first translated the New Testament into English, was eventually put to death for heresy.

In Islamic countries, it is sometimes the forces of secularism, not of religious orthodoxy, that are the more oppressive. We in the West have sometimes been slow to recognize this. Some non-Muslims cite the Islamic dress codes, especially for women, as a form of oppression. But how much is known of the serious oppression which was practised by Reza Shah's soldiers in Iran, who enforced secular rule by tearing off women's veils with their bayonets and ripping them to shreds in the street? In more recent times, it is interesting that the most oppressive of all regimes in the Middle East is also one of the most secular: Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The more we dig beneath the commonly held perceptions, the more we understand the dangers of making glib generalizations, which feed into the sort of common prejudices on which Samuel Huntington played in his book *The Clash of Civilizations*.

What we know as 'the Islamic world' is much too complex to be reduced to a single cultural idea. Many countries, from Morocco in the West to Indonesia in the East, have Muslim majorities. Islam plays many different roles in these societies, and there are many doctrinal differences

within Islam as practised there. This diversity is itself reflected in the many distinct Muslim communities here in Britain.

Nevertheless, I do not share the view expressed by some thinkers, like Edward Said in *Orientalism*, that cultures and civilizations are so interdependent and interrelated as to render all attempts to categorize them invalid.

Of course religion is not the only factor which affects relations between and among countries in Western Europe and the Middle East. Politics, economics, and regional factors are as important. But alongside these, religion does matter. 'How many battalions does the Pope have?' Stalin is said to have asked contemptuously. But in the long-term battle for the soul, it was Stalin and his successors who were bereft of an army, not the Pope.

It is both legitimate and important to try to identify points of difference between different faiths, as well as points of similarity. Understanding what people believe is a help to understanding how people behave. Faith matters to those who have it.

Almost without exception, religions are exclusive. It is not possible for one person to subscribe to more than one system of religious belief. Someone who defines himself as Muslim is also defining himself as not Christian and not Jewish. To belittle the differences between faiths is also, in a sense, to belittle the importance of those faiths to those who hold them.

This is not to say that religious difference necessarily entails social dislocation or political division. Just because a community shares a religious faith which is different from the prevailing orthodoxy in society does not mean that this community cannot be reconciled with the rest of society, or society with it.

Britain's history underlines this point. There have been periods when we have shown atrocious intolerance to other denominations and faiths; and some of this history still resonates, as in Northern Ireland, or Uganda, where British Protestant and French Catholic rivalries in the 1890s laid the foundations for lethal conflict in later decades. But we also, alongside this, have a proud history of welcoming religious minorities. Before the Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus of the twentieth century came the Jews from Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century, and indeed Huguenots from France in the seventeenth century.

But today, I believe we have to go beyond mere tolerance of difference to an active celebration of diversity. For example, I have long supported the establishment of state-funded faith schools for Muslim communities (and for Hindu and Sikh communities) alongside Church of England, Jewish, and Catholic schools. This is an idea which would be unthinkable in the United States or France. But we have nothing to fear from allowing Islam to exercise a positive, civilizing

influence on Britain today, just as it did for Western civilization as a whole in previous centuries. Already there are more than 1,500 mosques in the UK, facilities for Muslim prayer at airports, government departments and Parliament, and halal food in hospitals and schools. For my own Department, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, this year will be the third in which we have dispatched a team of Muslim British officials to Saudi Arabia to provide assistance for British pilgrims performing the Hajj to the holy places.

Dialogue and greater understanding between faiths can be of great value. At the same time, I understand the doubts which Fred Halliday has expressed about the idea of a dialogue. In his recent work about September 11, *Two Hours that Shook the World*, he points to the risk that a dialogue can put the emphasis on 'understanding' other cultures and communities, at the expense of, as he puts it, 'engaging with the ways in which communities, national and religious, violate universal rights'. Halliday suggests that global values and international law are a system of belief which transcend all faiths, and asserts that, 'The alternative to the clash of civilizations need not be the mutual indulgence of communities'.

I agree. But that does not lead me to reject the idea of dialogue, but rather to assert that, while dialogue should aim at promoting mutual respect, it must be critical too. Celebrating diversity, building a single, united but diverse society out of the many distinct communities which exist in our towns and cities, cannot mean that we turn a blind eye to practices which are unacceptable—whether these be forced marriage, discrimination in the workplace, or blindness in the face of overwhelming evidence of serious terrorist culpability.

The better we understand each other, the more we have the right to comment and to criticize. Alongside our rights as members of society, we all have responsibilities to uphold and to defend the common values on which society is founded.

The values that lie at the foundations of British society—human rights, the rule of law, democracy—are compatible with every faith. But they are not compatible with all practices. Extremist fanaticism, which denies the humanity of other human beings, can never be accepted in a society built on diversity. Extremism can appear in many guises, and has over time been excused by reference to all major religions. None has been immune. We saw all too graphically on September 11 that there are extremists who commit despicable acts in the name of Islam.

All of us who consider ourselves to be in the mainstream of our communities have a shared interest in taking on the extremists of every persuasion. We all have a responsibility, for example, to tackle anti-Semitism, which is a serious and genuine fear of many in the British Jewish community. And each community has a unique responsibility to tackle those who carry out or advocate extremist acts in their name.

I, as a white male, have a particular responsibility to take on and challenge those white extremists who act in my name against black or Asian citizens. Similarly, it should be incumbent on those who profess Islam to challenge the fanatics who cite Islam as a justification for appalling acts of violence.

However, in many religions there is a clear tendency to think of the most ascetic, the most rigorous, the most extreme form as being the most pure, the most perfect. But this is always dangerous. Where any faith or ideology is taken to the point where it denies the humanity of others it becomes not pure but perverted. We see this in some of the more extreme Christian sects, and indeed in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. And we see it in the travesty of Islam as practised by the Al-Qa'ida terrorists.

It would be tragic if the image of Islam among people of other faiths were to be defined by the extremists, and if that great faith became caricatured as intolerant, dogmatic, and violent when in reality it is none of these.

I understand that many Muslims share a sense of collective grievance. The sense of ummah, of a single worldwide Muslim community, means that festering disputes, whether in the West Bank and Gaza, in Iraq or in Kashmir, have the power to move and anger people far beyond their immediate region.

Karen Armstrong, in her book *Islam: A Short History*, has set out the ways in which religious fundamentalism or extremism can emerge as a response to a perceived threat. She points out that 'all fundamentalists feel that they are fighting for survival'. So it is important to address this sense of grievance, not least by trying to resolve the disputes and conflicts which can give rise to it.

But it is also important to recognize that the West is not anti-Islam. The military campaign in Afghanistan was not an attack on Islam. We were fighting violent fanaticism, pure and simple, and not for the first time. The UK itself has a long and proud history of standing up against extremism: not least in the Second World War. We have fought extremist violence in many forms since, including the fanatical nationalism of Slobodan Milosević in the former Yugoslavia, where violence was directed mainly against Muslims.

Indeed, the four major military campaigns which Britain has fought over the last decade have each had the effect of helping Muslims suffering oppression: Kuwait in 1991, Bosnia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, and Afghanistan in 2001.

I would hope that the great majority of Muslims, in Britain and elsewhere, would recognize that the military campaign in Afghanistan defended the very values of tolerance and diversity without which peaceful coexistence is impossible. Some Muslim leaders in Britain, and international

figures like President Musharraf in Pakistan, took an honourable and courageous stand about this.

But not everyone in the Islamic world shared their view. For many, outrage, or perhaps more commonly plain unease, were the prevailing reactions to the international coalition's military campaign against Al-Qa'ida and their protectors in the Taliban regime. Some in positions of respect and authority in their communities were all too ready to play on this unease, and to stoke up extremist feeling.

By now, I hope that the gradual establishment of a broad-based, multi-ethnic government in Kabul, and the wholehearted support that we are providing for it, have convinced many of the doubters about our intentions.

I know that mainstream Muslims do not feel they have more in common with Usama Bin Laden than with people of goodwill in other faiths. But I know from my own Muslim constituents that many mainstream Muslims can feel awkward about speaking out. I understand that the reasons for this are complex. Particularly communities of recent immigrants may feel the need to be defensive when some others in society still find their presence hard to accept. But it is important to avoid giving the impression of monolithic Muslim support for extremism, which plays right into the hands of those who would stir up hatred against Muslims.

So, with great respect, speaking as a non-Muslim, but as one who has watched Islam for many years, I want to suggest this evening that all of us have an interest in promoting a more robust, open, explicit debate and marginalizing the extremists.

It was to promote this sort of debate that a delegation of British Muslim Parliamentarians recently visited Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and showed that it is possible in a plural society for minority communities to gain representation and positions of authority. Similarly, from the start of the military campaign in Afghanistan, we have made it a priority to put up British spokesmen in the Arab and Islamic media, to make the case for our policy, and to engage with public opinion in the Islamic world.

Christian churches have recognized that they have a role to play here. The Archbishop of Canterbury last week convened a seminar of Muslim and Christian political and religious leaders at Lambeth Palace. This week, he, together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Cairo, convened a meeting in Alexandria of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian leaders to seek common ground in a joint quest for peace and reconciliation in Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

Tonight I would like to announce that the British Council is launching a new five-year programme to bring together young people of different cultural backgrounds from the UK and

Muslim countries. Under the banner 'Connecting Futures', this will involve a variety of projects which enable young people to listen to and learn from each other.

But as well as launching a debate, it is important to create the conditions in which a proper debate can take place. We all have to ask ourselves why it is that the egalitarian nature of Islam, to which I alluded earlier, has not produced more democratic, tolerant regimes in Islamic countries. I have mentioned my view that Islam is a natural vehicle for political protest.

I suspect that these two points are linked. The more people's views are disregarded by those in political power—in Muslim countries or in non-Muslim countries—the more their protest will take the form of Islamic extremism, and the more mainstream Muslims will feel the need to accommodate extremism.

It is therefore in everyone's interests, Muslims and non-Muslims, for these tensions to be aired properly, not suppressed in deep resentment which finds expression in ever more extreme forms. I believe there is an appetite for such a debate in Islamic countries. Where debate is stifled, this contributes to the impression that Muslims are trapped by dogma, but nothing should be further from the truth.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have spoken frankly this evening. I have always derived great benefit from frank discussions with my Muslim constituents in Blackburn, and I hope that we will all benefit from a similar debate this evening. As a politician, I believe passionately in the value of debate and dialogue. If we really believe in constructing a truly diverse society in this country, and a healthy global society, then we have to be prepared to learn more about each other, and to thrash out those points where we disagree.

I have talked tonight of the need for greater understanding of different faiths and cultures. Ultimately, though, I suspect we shall find that those of whatever faith who describe themselves as religious have far more in common than what divides them. It is time for all of us, of whatever faith, to engage in reasoned, informed debate, to stand up for what we can all believe in, to isolate the extremists and to reject fanaticism, whatever form it may take.