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DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS
and the Need for a World Ethic

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by

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It gives me great pleasure to address this Centre for Islamic Studies. Islam is not only one of the world's great religions. In the course of history it has also been the guiding spirit of more than one great civilization.

There was the great age of the Abbasid Caliphate, when Arabic was the main language of learning from Spain to Central Asia. And later there were such magnificent cultures as those of Mughal India, Safavid Iran or the Ottoman empire.

No one doubts that in the past there were distinct human "civilizations", in the plural. They rose and fell; they blossomed and they declined. One of the first writers to perceive this was the great Islamic historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun.

Some civilizations existed at the same time, in different parts of the world, and had little or no contact with each other. Others did come into contact, and often into conflict, seeking to dominate or conquer one another.

This second pattern, of interaction and competition between civilizations, became more common over the last two millennia. Perhaps the clearest example was the competition between Islamic and Christian civilizations. They, after all, were closely related to each other, being both derived from the ancient monotheistic tradition of the Middle East, which Muslims call *deen al-Ibraheem* -- the religion of Abraham.

In the medieval Crusades, Christians and Muslims fought each other for control of Jerusalem, for the city and the Land which were Holy to both of them, as well as to the Jews. But at different times their competition affected many other parts of the world, from Spain to Indonesia and from Russia to sub-Saharan Africa, where I come from.

Yet their interaction did not only take the form of conflict. There was also "dialogue", as different civilizations learned from each other.

In the Middle Ages, the Christians had much to learn from the Muslims: medicine, science, mathematics -- even the works of ancient Greek philosophers, lost in the European Dark Ages but preserved and translated into Arabic by Muslim scholars.

Later the Christian world developed superior organization and technology, and used these assets to conquer, or dominate, all the other civilizations in the world. The dialogue of civilizations became, to all intents and purposes, a monologue.

As a result of that Western expansion, and the spectacular improvements in transport and communications which have followed it, the peoples of the world today are much more closely interconnected than they used to be. In some respects at least, whether we like it or not, all of us are now living in a single, global civilization.

And yet in the last few years we seem to have heard more and more about "civilizations" in the plural -- and not in the past but in the present. Samuel Huntington's prediction of a "Clash of Civilizations" has stimulated an enormous amount of discussion since it first appeared in 1993.

All sensible people must wish to avoid such a clash. Certainly most Muslim leaders do.

Last September one far-sighted leader of a Muslim country, President Mohammed Khatami of Iran, made a memorable speech on the subject to the United Nations General Assembly. He said

that "the Islamic Revolution of the Iranian people ... calls for a dialogue among civilizations and cultures instead of a clash between them".

At his suggestion, the Assembly has since decided to proclaim the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.

So what are these separate civilizations in the world today, and what form can their dialogue take?

Professor Huntington was right to point out that, with the end of the cold war, we are passing into a phase where there is no longer a clear-cut

global conflict between ideologies, such as socialism and liberalism. Instead there are conflicts between identities, where the issue is not so much what you believe as what you are.

But is it right to see these conflicts as happening between different "civilizations"? I am not so sure. Sometimes the groups in conflict have very similar cultures. Some even share the same language.

Such was the case, for instance, with Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, and with Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda.

On the other hand, it is true that outsiders often identify with one or other side in these conflicts on the basis of religion or culture. There is a degree of fellow-feeling among Muslims across the world, as there is among Jews, or indeed white Anglo-Saxons, when they see members of their own group in conflict with people from other groups.

In this way historical traditions, values and stereotypes continue to bring some peoples together, while driving others apart.

"Civilizations" no longer exist as separate entities in the way they once did. But modern societies still bear the strong stamp of history, and still identify with each other along cultural fault lines.

Among these fault lines, the one that generates most discussion today runs between Islamic and Western societies.

Objectively, it may seem somewhat artificial -- especially to an audience like this, in which it would be hard to say who is Muslim and who is Western, and I'm sure many are both. But subjectively it can be very real, especially perhaps to Islamic peoples whose view of themselves has been strongly affected by the history of the last millennium.

Most Muslims are acutely aware that their religion and civilization were once dominant in large parts of Europe, Africa and Asia.

They know that this empire was gradually lost, and that almost all Muslim countries fell under direct or indirect Western domination. Today colonialism has ended, but many Muslims still resent their manifest inequality with the West in power politics. Many of them have a sense of defeat and disadvantage.

Their resentment has been fed by the unjust treatment of the Palestinians and, more recently, by atrocities committed against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.

Muslims today would like to see their culture and civilization duly respected, by themselves and by others, as was the case in the past. That surely, is a hope we should all share, provided we understand that respect today is no longer to be earned by military conquest.

Modern societies are too closely linked with each other, and modern weapons are too terrifyingly destructive, for interaction between modern "civilizations" to take the form of armed conflict, as that between past civilizations often did.

Today's dialogue must be a peaceful one. That is one reason why I believe it has to proceed on the basis of a set of shared values.

Even the most extreme moral relativist is condemned to be a universalist in this sense. The doctrine of "live and let live" will only work if all cultures and all societies accept it as the norm.

Personally, however, I do not believe that "live and let live" is a sufficient norm for today's global society. And that, perhaps, is where I part company from Professor Huntington.

I do think it is vital that we preserve and cherish diversity wherever we can. But not, as he suggests, by identifying "civilizations" with geographically distinct cultural blocs.

That might perhaps preserve an appearance of cultural diversity at the global level. But each bloc would have a depressingly closed and monolithic culture on the local level.

Professor Huntington himself seems to advocate a world like that, at the end of his book, when he warns against the danger of America becoming a multi-civilizational country, or in his terms a "torn" society.

I think most of us would disagree with that. Most of us feel that America's openness and diversity are its best qualities, and that if it tried to impose cultural conformity it would be embarking, like other great Powers before it, on the road of decline.

The conventional view is that civilizations are destroyed by internal conflict, which weakens their defences, causing them to fall prey to the barbarians at the gates. But in so far as that is true, I suspect it is because rulers and leaders have too often tried to deal with internal conflict in ways which end up making it worse.

They have suppressed dissent and ignored genuine grievances, and so driven more and more people to rebel, even in alliance with those dreaded "barbarians".

In fact the very notion that foreigners are barbarians, without any civilization or ideas of their own worth studying, may be one of the things that saps the strength of a supposedly superior civilization, and eventually brings about its downfall.

The history of Islamic civilization illustrates this point. For hundreds of years the Muslim world was in the forefront of scientific and technical progress, as well as artistic achievement -- at a time when Muslim scholars were bringing together Greek philosophical and Indian mathematical concepts, while Muslim statesmen were refining Persian and Byzantine ideas of kingship.

A great Jewish scholar like Maimonides could flourish in the service of Muslim rulers. And later the Ottoman empire gave asylum to both Jews and Christians fleeing from persecution in Christian States.

Indeed, the Ottomans for several centuries brought good administration to regions which have too often lacked it since -- the southern and eastern Mediterranean, and the Balkans. Their empire was for long a splendid example of cultural and ethnic pluralism, from which we still have much to learn.

Yet sadly the same Ottoman empire allowed Islamic thought to become dominated by conservative theologians who opposed all innovations -- from coffee to the printing press -- equating them with heresy. The result was that -- even while the West was surging ahead through the embrace of rationalism and science -- in the leading Islamic State of the time religion came to be seen as an obstacle to reform, and modernization as something inherently anti-religious.

Some of the current attempts to restore Islamic greatness are, I fear, doomed to fail because -- instead of loosening these shackles of obscurantism -- they are trying to fasten them even more tightly.

This is especially true of those movements that resort to violence as a means of enforcement, ignoring the clear message of the Quran that "there is no compulsion in religion". I fear this can only lead to even greater alienation.

Yet I am sure there is no necessary conflict between belief and modernity, in Islam any more than in other religions. The challenge for Muslim thinkers, here in Oxford and elsewhere, must be to live up to the finest traditions of Islamic thought -- including the tradition of "ijtihad", or free interpretation, not just in theology and law but in all the arts and sciences. They should encourage their fellow Muslims to enquire freely what is good and bad in other cultures, as in their own.

All of us who come from developing countries need to understand that the greatest gap between the developed and the developing world is the "knowledge gap". It can only be bridged by open-minded research and free, courageous thought.

The way forward, while preserving the bedrock of our traditions in belief and custom, is to free our minds to absorb and understand a world that is constantly changing.

If Ibn Khaldun were alive today, I am sure this would be his message to the Muslim peoples: live up to the best traditions of your past, and play your full part in a future of co-existence and constant interaction between different traditions.

One contemporary Muslim, at least, did preach that message: Eqbal Ahmad, whose death last month we must all mourn. Four years ago he gave up his glittering academic career in the United States, and went back to work in Pakistan.

It is tragic that he did not live to endow his own country with a world-class university, named after Ibn Khaldun, as he dreamed of doing. But I am sure his example will inspire others to carry on his work.

In short, our world ethic cannot be simply a matter of "live and let live", in the sense of letting each State enforce its own orthodoxy on all its citizens. Still less can it consist of letting one or two powerful "core States" enforce their will on others which are deemed to share their culture.

On the contrary, we must accept -- and even cultivate -- the presence of different traditions within each region of the world, and indeed within each society.

That is why I am glad to be speaking today, not just at a centre of Islamic studies, but at a centre of Islamic studies in Britain -- a major Western country -- and in Oxford, a historic seat of Western learning.

It is good that such a centre is associated with this great university. I hope in the future the association will become even closer, as the Centre develops its programme of teaching and research.

It also gives me great pleasure to follow in the steps of the Prince of Wales, who from this very lectern, six years ago, publicly acknowledged the debt which Western civilization owes to the Islamic world.

Many of you will remember that His Royal Highness spoke not only about Muslim contributions to the culture of medieval and renaissance Europe. He

also spoke of the millions of Muslims living in the West today -- one million of them, or probably more by now, here in Britain.

"These people", he said, "are an asset to Britain." Of course they are. More than that, I would say that Muslim communities are an essential part of Western society today. They represent one of many traditions that are coming together in the modern West.

Their presence makes possible a dialogue of civilizations -- or at least of traditions -- within the West. They bring their own traditions to this dialogue, and they are well placed to study other traditions, some of which have a longer history in Western societies.

They can absorb what they find valuable in those traditions, incorporate it into their own outlook and way of life, and also transmit it to fellow Muslims in other countries, particularly those where they have close family ties.

These Western Muslim communities will, I suspect, be seen by future generations as an important source of renewal and inspiration in Islamic thought.

So the Dialogue among Civilizations must be a dialogue within societies as well as between them. President Khatami himself implied this, when he said that the dialogue is necessary for the "enhancement of civility, whether at national or international level".

And it must be a dialogue of mutual respect. The aim is not to eliminate differences between human beings, but to preserve and even celebrate them as a source of joy and strength.

That is the world ethic that we need: a framework of shared values -- a sense of our common humanity -- within which different traditions can co- exist.

People must be able to follow their own traditions without making war on each other. They must have sufficient freedom to exchange ideas. They must be able to learn from each other.

As the Quran says -- in a passage which I know is a favourite of yours, Dr. Nizami [Director of the Centre]:

"O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other" -- "not", a leading commentator adds, "that you may despise each other". [49:13]

And that means that each nation must not only respect the culture and traditions of others, but must also allow its own citizens -- women and men alike -- the freedom to think for themselves. As President Khatami told the General Assembly:

"We should recognize that both men and women are valuable components of humanity that equally possess the potential for intellectual, social, cultural and political development, and that comprehensive and sustainable development is only possible through the active participation of both men and women in social life."

All the great religions and traditions overlap when it comes to the fundamental principles of human conduct: charity, justice, compassion, mutual respect, the equality of human beings in the sight of God.

That is what has made it possible for States in all parts of the world, representing many different religious and cultural traditions, to espouse the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other more detailed international agreements which flow from it.

It may be presumptuous to single out any of these rights and obligations for special emphasis, but in this context none can be more important than freedom of thought and of expression.

Those freedoms enable human beings to listen to each other, respect each other's traditions, and learn from each other. Whatever else we define as specific to a particular culture or civilization, those freedoms are vital to us all, and we must never part with them.

In Oxford, and in the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies, I know that this essential point is understood. You are well placed to spread your understanding of it far and wide, and I'm sure you will do so.