

In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful

Address of HE Shaykh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Salmi, the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs at the Opening Session of the Inter-faith Programme at Cambridge University

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters.

Professor Ford's initiative has provoked a good deal of attention, optimism and approval. He came to Muscat at the invitation of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, and delivered a lecture at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. In this speech he mentioned a number of points and issues, entitling it 'A Muscat Manifesto of Dialogue between Abrahamic Religions'.

When I received his invitation to attend this event, I thought it necessary, at this starting-point of our collaboration, to begin with some initial observations and to propose some relevant mechanisms, to increase the fruitfulness of our discussion and to enable us all to move through the present important stage with the internal calm necessary to enable us to progress and to achieve our goals.

We support this Manifesto, and are considering it the basis for discussion and for developing further ties. We hope that it will be, thanks to Professor Ford's efforts, a beneficial initiative, and an intellectual and methodological contribution to improving relations between the Abrahamic religions.

It seems to me that the present stage is important for two reasons. Firstly, there are unfavourable international conditions: phrases such as the 'Clash of Civilisations' or the 'Green Peril' abound, and they indicate a worsening relationship. Secondly, four centuries of interaction have led to a closed horizon: this has been due to weakness of will and to mistakes of approach and purpose.

We seek to combine two goals: mutual knowledge and mutual compassion. The first of these goals, mutual knowledge, has been defined by Almighty God as an objective in human relations, irrespective of human distinction in created form, in beliefs, in customs and in habits. This is stated in the verse:

'O mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you into peoples and tribes, that you might come to know one another. The noblest of you in God's sight is the one who fears Him most.'

In this text we find difference in created form ('male and female'), and difference in social organisation ('peoples and tribes'). Despite this, or because of it, the objective must be to overcome disputes that arise from difference; and this by means of 'mutual knowledge'. This, in turn, takes the form of three steps: knowledge, then understanding, and then recognition.

Knowledge signifies coming to know the Other realistically, objectively, and responsibly; it also signifies coming to know his particularity, his ways of thought, his behaviour, and his interests. There is no clear line between knowledge and understanding, although the latter entails an active dimension, which takes the form of empathy and the desire to grow closer. Empathy reaches its highest point with positive recognition of the fact of difference and of the Other's still ongoing separate pathway. It is not possible for human nature to abandon its own identity, however great one's empathy with and admiration for the Other, but recognising difference and the legitimacy of the Other's otherness is a high accomplishment that raises up our humanity and our faith and ethics.

The repercussions and various dimensions of the Qur'anic process of mutual knowledge, whether in its individual or social dimensions, have not been studied and understood by Muslims or by others. This is because of the unfavourable circumstances that have prevailed in the relations between nations in the last century, and also the unfavourable conditions that have governed Muslim-Western relations for two centuries. Because of the absence of mutual knowledge, or any attempt to achieve it, mutual rivalry prevailed, rendering it difficult for both sides to act outside the context of power relationships. After this, extremists and radicals took control on both sides, making it hard to intervene, let alone to improve knowledge and recognition.

If recognition is a rich process of knowledge, understanding, and acknowledgement, then its highest degree, or its ultimate outcome, is the second of our goals: compassion itself, or that which Professor Ford called in his Oman lecture 'Blessing'. Almighty God says: 'We have sent you only as a compassion to the worlds'; and the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, said: 'I am nothing but a compassion bestowed.' So the summit of knowledge, or mutual knowledge and understanding, is compassion, which, though the humanity of man, brings them to broad and rich regions which, when reached, preclude disputatiousness and contention.

It is clear that what is meant by mutual compassion is relationships between individuals, first of all, but it can, through persistence, constancy, and a strong desire to love, continue until it supplies a moral framework for the relations between religions, cultures and nations. Mutual knowledge and recognition are a right, and mutual compassion is a virtue and a duty, as well as a right.

These two goals (mutual knowledge and mutual compassion) require the initiative to be taken by the believers, who are the adherents of the Abrahamic religions, on the basis of two principles defined by the Holy Qur'an in its address to the People of the Book:

'Say, O people of the Book! Come to a common word between us and you, that we shall worship none but God, and that none of us shall take others as lords beside God; and if they turn away, then say: bear witness that we are Muslims'. (Al-Imran, 64)

This comprehensive Qur'anic invitation incorporates several particular terms, or keys: a common word, worship of none but God, rejecting attribution of lordship to others, maintaining submission to God, even if others reject any partnership on the basis of these principles.

The 'common word' defines the method: careful adherence to uprightness, sensitivity and justice in addressing the Other and acknowledging him. Worshipping God alone means uniting in responsible humanity before the single Divine Essence. Rejecting religious self-exaltation is the consequence of upholding the unity of the Creator and His power and lordship. But even were the People of the Book to decline to meet on the basis of these principles, this would not provide an excuse for enmity or dispute; rather, what would be needed in this case would be openly to state one's submission to God, and to insist on the path of mutual knowledge, understanding and compassion.

The path of mutual knowledge and compassion is a comprehensive human path, and constitutes a principle addressed to the entire human race. But the aspiration of the Holy Qur'an is that the Abrahamic religions should lead the rest of humanity in the direction of mutual knowledge and compassion because of the large shared issues which unite them, 'on a common word', in affirming divine unity, and in denying the attribution of lordship to what is not God.

For this reason a conscious agreement on this should serve the followers of the Abrahamic religions, and then all of humanity. The issue is simply whether we people of faith command the ability to take the initiative or not. The 'common word' and professing the unity of God are the most

accessible ways of providing mutual understanding and compassion.

Relations between the followers of the Abrahamic religions have witnessed various episodes of slackening, dispute, and failure. Self-apotheosis, or claiming mastery and victory, were the main causes underlying failure to come to a 'common word between us and you'; and if this was so, how then could humanity be summoned to mutual knowledge and compassion?

In 1999 the Taliban destroyed the two historic Buddha statues at Bamiyan in Afghanistan. I remember that the Tibetan Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama said: The Christians and Muslims, during past centuries when they ruled the whole world, did not follow amongst themselves, or towards other religions and cultures, the way of recognition and justice; instead, their concern was always with taking control and power, and violent conquest!

Crisis has dominated relations between the Muslims and the Christians for the past two centuries, particularly in Muslim-Protestant relations. The reason is attributable to two factors: firstly, the worsening of some political problems which had religious, cultural and symbolic dimensions, such as the Palestine issue, and the situation of Muslim communities in the West; and secondly, a negative public opinion of Islam, reciprocated among some Muslims with negativity and also with violence.

Over the past ten years I have pursued these issues in the course of many discussions with intellectual and political leaders in West and East. As a result of consultations, reflections, experiences and discussion, I have suggested a method to recover a proper trajectory via religious ethics, in three cognitive processes: mind, justice, and morality.

Scholarly interaction with the Holy Qur'an is either through exegesis, that is to say, direct understanding, or through hermeneutics, in other words, indirect understanding. There is no doubt that the ethical and mental processes that I mentioned (mind, justice and morality) are hermeneutically rooted in the holy texts of the Abrahamic religions. In addition to this perception I have wanted these steps to constitute our method. As we have already spoken about goals and principles, we will constantly be committed to the principles of the Abrahamic religions.

As part of our engagement in this initiative of recovery and new beginnings, we launched the Magazine *Tolerance*. Twenty-six volumes have already appeared. Its goal is to promote the practice and implementation of toleration, with critical reflections, to clarify related concepts and to combat false ideas.

Similarly, in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman, we have in the past eight years organised an annual Cultural Festival to which we have invited around a hundred Western religious, political and economic thinkers and lecturers (about fifteen coming each year), to discuss issues on which we differ and the values of tolerance and progress, and Muslim-Western relations in the religious, political, economic and cultural domains. Our purpose has been to implement practical reviews of concepts, goals, and interests, by intelligently grasping and managing problems, proposing definitions and ways out of difficulties, seeking to clarify roads to effective and constructive dialogue, and to discover new and constantly-renewed means and methods of finding knowledge and cooperation with others.

It is said in the Gospels that knowledge makes us free. This is indeed true; but to be actualised it needs to be coupled with criticism, self-reflection, and the redefinition of concepts using the critical faculties.

We have two Muslim thinkers who lived as contemporaries in the ninth Gregorian century: al-

Muhasibi (d.243H), and al-Kindi (d.252H). Kindi embraced Aristotle's viewpoint on the nature of the intellect and its functions, saying that it was an indivisible substance whose function was detached perception and the assessment of entities. Muhasibi took the view that the intellect is an innate tendency or a light that increases and grows stronger through learning and experience.

Through knowledge, learning, acquisition and research, we are always capable of growth and of putting things in their right places, as long as we do not lose sight of the goals of mutual knowledge and compassion.

As for the second step, or the other comparison, as part of this orientation, it comprises justice. By justice we mean impartiality in our judgements and evaluations, and also justice in the way we behave and conduct ourselves. If we in this context consider the intellect to be a moral and human value characterised by detachment, then justice is the instrument the intellect uses in correcting discursive thought, and in motivating us to a particular mental or practical activity.

Then comes the third step, morality, which from one angle connects us to the principle of divine unity and the rejection of self-apotheosis, and from another perspective connects us to the two objectives of mutual knowledge and subjugation.

One of the benefits of this three-step method is that on the one hand it links us to the theology of the Abrahamic religions, and on the other to the other cultures and faiths. 'Let none of us take each other as lords besides God'. And let us not ignore the supreme value of mutual knowledge and compassion. This connects us without any great intellectual or behavioural difficulty to the path of 'racing each other to good works', or positive and free competition in such works, as God says in the Holy Qur'an: 'And vie with one another in good works'. The importance of this is that sacred good works are autonomous values that can be attained by Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic individuals.

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters

It is said that the world of the first half at least of the twenty-first century will be a world of religion.

There are some religious believers who judge the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries as an age of impulses that were in revolt against religion and morality. But our view of the last century is that the religions too were used to provoke divisions. Professor Hans Küng said, in the nineties of the last century, that peace in the world depends on peace between the religions, and that there can be no peace between the religions except through dialogue between them.

My underlying purpose in offering these observations has been to help the process of discovering a new way for religions and cultures to be in dialogue, which will be of service in fostering the peace, security and stability of the world.

We are embarking upon our cooperation with the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme in the form of the Chair gifted to this university by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id, may God protect and preserve him.

The text of the 'Muscat Manifesto' will be one of the first things on which we shall collaborate, as we discuss, support and reflect. It is my hope that these reflections will also play a part in facilitating the process of cooperation and dialogue.

Thank you.

Peace be upon you and the compassion of God