

Speech delivered to the American Society of Missiology
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Prof. Hunsberger, Conference Chair,
Scholars and Researchers,
Members of the Reformed Church
and Respected Audience,

First, I would like to express my appreciation for your invitation to address you at your annual conference. It is an important occasion, and there is much to be said and discussed with you. This forum, as I see it, is one of the best places for discussion and exchange of views regarding Christian - Muslim relations, relations between Christianity and Islam, and between the United States and the Arabs. It is also a place to discuss the challenges that we as believers face in today's world, and how we can reach a common understanding and a shared vision so that we may work together to further the great human values of freedom, progress, justice, and peace.

Let me start by clarifying the notion of a shared vision or worldview that I just mentioned. Then I will consider a second notion that is the subject of your conference, the concept of public theology. As you are aware in your capacity as, for the most part, professors of theology, ethics, philosophy, or public policy, the term "worldview" has been overloaded with major ideological meanings, so much so that talking about the capitalist or socialist social orders was construed as talking about two different human species--their only similarity residing in being bipeds.

In this regard, I do not wish to underestimate the differences between human beings due to their distinct natural, economic, religious, cultural and political settings; however, without going into the theoretical and philosophical origins of the concept mentioned and without undue oversimplification, I believe in shared universal values that reside in our common humanity. These are the values that are indisputable today, namely, freedom, equality, justice and peace. These are universal principles that, as we all know, have pride of place in the American Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution's Declaration, the Charter of the United Nations, the World Declaration of Human Rights, and the manifestos of liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin American. While in these documents and declarations these values were considered natural rights, we, the followers of the Abrahamic faiths, consider them to be the foundation of human dignity with which God the Exalted has privileged the human race. In this vein, Muslim jurists determined necessary rights or interests for all human beings without which the human species cannot continue in existence, and the protection of such rights is the purpose of divine laws. These are the rights to life, reason, religion, procreation, and property.

From the preceding it follows that there are no differences between humans on the basis of their worldviews but on the mechanisms and means of their implementation. Also I would like to add that agreement on universal human purposes or ends does not reduce the disagreements about the means of attaining them, nor does it make them a foregone conclusion. Even after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights in 1948, there erupted hundreds of wars and conflicts, major or minor, during the Cold War and its aftermath. Yet claiming a single humanity and a single world is an advanced notion that should not be given up, but rather it should be publicized and the efficiency of those institutions charged with implementing it should be enhanced. In today's context, this charge falls at the national level on national governments and at the international level on global institutions and international law. The eruption of internal, regional, and world conflicts demonstrates that those institutions often fail to live up to their national and human responsibilities. It is from within this that I would like to address the concept that you have chosen as the title of your conference, public theology, which I understand to be a discussion of the role of religion in public life and public affairs.

There are in our respective cultural spheres many postulates on the differences between Christianity and Islam that are taken for granted. One is that while Christianity separates religion and state, Islam does not. Orientalists and ideologues of Islamic movements point out that while the Holy Quran and Islam in general contain legislation on public affairs, nothing similar exists in Christianity. In my view the difference does not lie in the origins of the two religions, but on the different evolution of the relation between religion and state in the two cultural domains. No religious community, no matter how small, can afford to ignore public affairs, even if not explicitly required by its religious doctrine. To do so would place one under threat of extinction. It is a well known fact that early Christians did not intervene in public matters, and yet the Roman Empire persecuted them violently. What I mean is that the difference between our experience and the Christian experience in the West arises from the manner in which the religious community handled public matters, either by means of a single or two separate institutions. Should there be one institution taking care of religious affairs and a second for public affairs, or only one institution for both? The Roman Empire considered that it was its right to determine not just the public life of its citizens, but also their religious life. Hence its persecution of Christianity, just as it persecuted Judaism before. The opposite occurred after the 9th Christian Century when the Papal authority sought control of political authority as well. This conflict, as you well know, continued until the advent of the Protestant Reformation.

The conditions in the Medieval Islamic experience were different. A century and a half after the rise of Islam, there arose a religious institution next to the political institution, the former enjoying total autonomy in religious affairs, in a kind of division of labor. Thus Islam remained the highest authority, i.e., while there was no separation between religion and the state, there was a separation between political authority and religious-legal authority, with some tensions on the periphery of each on what is properly religious and what is properly political or public. Hence there was no serious conflict between religion and the state in Medieval Islam and the two domains continued to mutually influence one another with the religious-legal institution in classical Islam being a vital force of civil society, enjoying a great moral authority by virtue of which it exercised legal supervision and expressed various social interests.

What I want to indicate here is that this division of labor is no longer applicable in the contemporary Muslim cultural domain. Today wide sectors of the public and the advocates of political Islam are convinced that Islam is both religion and state, and that men of religion and religious jurists ought to be in charge in the public domain based on

the supposition that supervision and moral guidance are insufficient to make a state Islamic. Again this new conception is not due to a difference in nature between Islam and Christianity. The development of the rise of politically oriented religious movements is not specific to the Muslim world, as you are well aware.

However it is more acute and prominent in some Arab and Muslim countries due to two factors: its connection to the crises of identity on the one hand, and to the modern political experience in the Arab and Muslim worlds on the other. During the past two centuries these two worlds were colonized by European conquest, and all social forces, including religious institutions, took part in the anti-colonial struggle for independence. Arab and Muslim states were cast in the new world-order between the two world wars and completed after the Second World War. There was a major disconnect, not only at the political level, but also at the social and cultural levels. Since the 1930s, we have been faced with the problem of Westernization, whereby important social groups felt their identity was threatened. The new states and political entities were not always successful in matters of economic development and the integration of the religiously-inclined groups into the new economic and political processes. Compounding the problem was the fact that the Middle East and Gulf regions were a major arena of the Cold War because of their oil and strategic location and proximity to the former Soviet Union, China, and India.

In a milieu that consisted of struggles for independence, international intervention, the rise of the State of Israel as an imposed entity in the middle of the Arab East, and the feelings of alienation, marginalization and dependency, Islamic revivalism made its appearance as an expression of fear of loss of identity and the desire for a strong state that would face all these problems. The basic doctrine of this revivalism was that the Muslim community and their religion was in danger, and that God is angry with us because Islam was removed from society after it was excluded from the state through Westernization and client- status. All of this culminated tragically on 9/11/2001.

Since the 1950s, fundamentalist Islam has become an opposition force in major Arab Countries, and it was used in the Cold War against the Soviets in Afghanistan, thus providing its supporters with fighting skills. The rest of the story is common knowledge by now. After the fundamentalists believed they had achieved victory against Marxism in Afghanistan, they turned against the other wing of Westernization by attempting to bring down the Arab and Islamic regimes they considered supporters of the West in our region. Then came 9/11 and the United States' response of "the War on Terror."

What has this presentation to do with public theology, the subject of our conference that I want to talk about and share your concern with? I will come back to this issue in the third section of this talk. In this second section of my presentation, I would like to consider the crisis in Arab/American relations due to 9/11, Christian-Muslim relations, and how we have dealt and continue to deal with old and new issues and problems.

Before the events of 9/11, there appeared a discourse in Europe and the U.S. about the "Green Menace" and the "Clash of Civilizations". Subsequent to this, American and European leaders called for an Islamic reform and for reforms in the administration of public affairs in Arab countries. In fact, we are witnessing a major resurgence of religion just as you are in the U.S. and other parts of the world,. Violent fundamentalism is only a small part of this movement that is generally and predominantly a vast trend

towards piety and the performance of Islamic rites, caring for gentle family life and family values, as well as the social aspects of religious commitment. Additionally, Sufi trends flourish today that do not concern themselves with public life, and which some Western observers consider the desirable form of Islam for the future.

As in other Abrahamic faiths, religious life in Islam is based on the sacred text and tradition. Tradition is what situates the sacred text in its social and historical contexts. Some historians of religion have spoken about the “invention of tradition,” which is, generally speaking, what is taking place inside Islam today. This was preceded a century before by major reformist movements whose task was to renovate what we call *ijtihad*, i.e., the theoretical and practical efforts at adapting the sacred texts and their interpretations to the changing conditions of human existence. Usama Bin Laden has talked about the two realms, the realm of unbelief and war and the realm of faith and Islam. This is an old juristic doctrine that is not based on the Quran but on the imperial traditions of Muslim states in medieval times. The reformist movement a century ago had already superseded this doctrine when it considered Holy War to be only defensive war; they stressed, based on other classical doctrines, that the world is one, and that Muslim relations with non-hostile others should be guided by good will, cooperation, and preaching. They referred to the case of Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in modern times, where no Muslim soldier had ever landed and which converted to Islam via commerce and peaceful preaching. The reformist Muslims said, and continue to say, that Islam is not under threat nor is it weak, as evidenced by the world’s one-fifth Muslim population and its growing appeal. There is not a single Muslim thinker today who considers that our problems in the world are religious problems, but there is consensus that they are economic, political, and strategic problems. Muslim thinkers hope that the successful experiences of Muslim communities in Europe, the U.S., and Australia in living with other religious and cultural groups would contribute positively to the renewal of our life and vision of the non-Muslim other in our original societies.

The crime of 9/11 was a great disappointment for Muslim intellectuals because it would cause serious harm to Muslims in the West, and in our own countries it would impede our cultural development and our relations with the other in our societies, which are pluralistic, both religiously and ethnically. Not all Arabs are Muslim just as there is no majority-Muslim country in Asia and Africa that does not have Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and other faiths. In my country, Oman, we have had citizens from other religions living with us for the past 300 years, and Muslims themselves belong to different races and creeds. We have never had problems in the relations between these various groups in our society. I recall the Sultan of Oman sending a delegation to New York in the last century to attend the Universal Exposition.

For a century and a half now, there has been a strong desire on the part of Arabs and Muslims to communicate peacefully and foster healthy ties with the world. When the war was launched against Iraq and massive demonstrations occurred in protest in Europe and the U.S., people in our land felt that the world is one and that Western societies care for them and wish to relate to them on the basis of equality and justice. With Samuel Huntington’s 1993 article on “the Clash of Civilizations” and his subsequent book in 1996, Arab or Muslim thinkers were appalled and responded painfully and disapprovingly. Yet the best response I read was that of Columbia professor Richard Bulliet’s book, *The Case for Christian-Muslim Civilization*. As for the anthropologist

Jack Goody, he wrote in his treatise *Islam in Europe* that the conflict between Muslims and the West could be the result not of great difference but great similarity.

Dialogue between Christian and Muslim groups and organizations has been going on for more than a century, and there are major educational institutions in the Arab and Islamic East that were founded by Protestant and Catholic churches that played an important role in the Arab and Islamic renaissance and modernity. These institutions went beyond missionary activity and established true dialogue and lasting impact on different Arab and Muslim communities. I want to mention in this context the good work performed for over a century by the Reformed Church in America in Oman and Eastern Arabia. Many Western and non-Western scholars have criticized Orientalism, seeing its work in the negative light of colonial and missionary endeavors. In reality, Orientalism did a major service by introducing Islamic civilization to Europeans and Americans by highlighting the Arab and Islamic contemporary worlds, as well as their centuries-old relations with the rest of the world.

This does not signify the absence of serious problems between the Arabs and Europeans, or between the Arabs and the Americans. But these problems are not religious in nature as the fundamentalists of both parties claim. While these problems exist and are real, saying that they are religious would confer on them an eternal character. Michael Novak's important book that appeared a year ago, *The Universal Hunger for Liberty*, reminds us of the Western perception of the past and its tragedies. We Muslims grieve over the Crusades, and Westerners, he says, grieve over the Arab and Muslim conquest of the Italian Islands and Spain, as well as the Ottoman Muslims' attempts to conquer the whole of Europe. While these are undeniable facts, I don't believe that they have a strong impact on contemporary consciousness, whether yours or ours. Also I don't believe that the European colonial conquests of the past two centuries have much to do with avenging Spain or the Ottoman Empire.

There is no justification for the crime of 9/11, and Arabs ought to be the first to make sure that it is not repeated against the U.S. or any other nation. We have to work on reforming our public affairs and promoting the process of Islamic renovation. The U.S. and world community have to help us in this to achieve successful political and economic solutions to the existing problems. The Palestinian issue is a continuing wound for the whole of humanity, and we cannot solve it on our own. The Egyptians and Jordanians established peace treaties with Israel, and yet war and tragedy continue in Palestine. As if this were not enough, the Iraq war, with its fabricated excuses, came to make things worse. Then came the latest justification: the spread of democracy, which carries no weight in the face of all the bloodshed and destruction. Just as the Afghan war produced Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the Iraq war resulted in Zarqawi and other things of which we do not yet know. In sum, Muslims do not want to be aggressors nor victims; this is our duty towards our peoples and the world. Also, our rights should be upheld by the international community and the U.S. government.

We are convinced that the future of one third of humanity at least is dependent on this great human experiment, this open society in the United States. In today's world, no one has any interest that the U.S., this large active human community, be subject to harm. We affirm that we still have great hope in the U.S. and Western civilization, just as we have great hope in Arab civilization. However, with these hopes we also see responsibility.

The reformist Catholic thinker, Hans Kung, in his work on a Global Ethic and Global Responsibility, has presented a plan for world peace in three interrelated principles: First, there is no human coexistence without an international morality; second, there is no peace between nations without peace between religions; and third, there is no peace between world religions without a dialogue between them. Whatever our opinion is of this plan, I think it is useful as an entry point into the subject of public theology.

The central world-vision for Muslims in understanding inter-human relations is in the famous Quranic verse: “O humans. We have created you male and female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may recognize one another. The best amongst you in the eyes of God are the ones who are most God fearing” (49:13). In Islam, mutual recognition between humans is the means of managing our differences, not in the sense of eliminating these differences, which is impossible. Quranic recognition is based on true and unbiased knowledge of the other who is different. The next step comes in another verse that says we are to “compete for goodness” (5:48), making the highest form of recognition one of excelling in the good and well-being of humans. Mutual recognition, cooperation, and solidarity between the different human communities are tested by the shared commitment to and common pursuit of the highest good. Mutual recognition and competition for goodness in the Quran has certain conditions and criteria, and it is the prerogative and duty of the People of the Book, the inheritors and followers of the Abrahamic faith. The Quran specifies them as bestowed with a special responsibility: “O people of the Book, let us reach the same word between you and us, that we worship no one except God and do not associate anything with Him, and that we do not take one from our midst as a god to the exclusion of God” (3:63). Human beings of different communities are equal in humanity and equal before God, and their ways become good through belief in the one God and belief in the dignity of creation, the dignity of faith, and the dignity of human action based on the exalted religious and moral values. “God commands justice, charity and support of relatives, and he prohibits lawlessness, evil and transgression. He teaches you that you may remember” (16:90).

On the basis of this vision for inter-human relations and the values it carries, what are the tools that the community of believers ought to use to implement the vision? The Quran determines the mission of Islam and believers in two short phrases: commanding the good and prohibiting the bad (9:71). The Quran uses various expressions for those in charge of commanding goodness and prohibiting evil. In one verse God says: ‘Let there be amongst you a group who call for goodness and command the good and prohibit the bad’ (3:104). This verse contains two things. First it defines the good as the human good. And second it means that there is a specialized group with this function among the believers. Some theologians have seen in this verse a justification for the rise of the religious institution, and there came into being such an institution during Medieval Islamic times that was in charge of religious rites, instruction, and legal edicts. Yet the Quranic discourse is directed in the majority of verses to the whole community of believers, not a specific group inside it or outside it, thus the religious institution retained a purely functional character without becoming a centralized hierarchy as in Catholicism or most non-Abrahamic religions. The Islamic experience in this respect is closer to the Protestant experience, emphasizing individual responsibility and direct personal relationship with God. Also the function of collective salvation is entrusted to the

community of believers. Thus the man of calling and knowledge in Islam is a representative of the religious community and not of God the Exalted. He has as much legitimacy as the authority he acquires from the people to whom he preaches, instructs in law, or leads in prayer.

Thus two trajectories meet in the Quranic and Islamic worldview: First is the trajectory of human dignity that is based upon man's humanity and his selection by God to be his representative on Earth through his inhabiting it, and this dignity is also based on the five Divine purposes through which man can achieve his humanity. The second trajectory is that of mutual recognition, cooperation, and excellence for the propagation of goodness and realizing the aims of populating the Earth. The means of spreading this vision inside the community of believers and outside it is the commanding of the good and the prohibition of the bad, a task to be assumed by the community of believers directly in its relations with different nations and communities, and indirectly through preachers and the carriers of the Divine message to the world. Commanding the good and forbidding evil enter into the domain of religious obligation or calling, as expressed by Max Weber. In my view, this is the substance of public theology, i.e., the vision held by people of faith and their actions inside their own societies and with respect to other religions, cultures, and peoples. The notion of public theology is not new since it is based on religious obligation and moral responsibility. But we, as people of faith, have to admit our shortcomings in achieving this Divine and human purpose and addressing the advances on us made by the advocates of natural human rights in their search for universal values and their incorporation in international binding agreements. In reality we are very late in our attempt to satisfy the demands of the great religious and moral values.

Today, after the end of the Cold War, we have a new chance to work together for the benefit of humanity and its progress. This is based three reasons. First is the great religious resurgence in all faiths, giving us the power to influence national and international affairs. Pope John Paul II was a good example in his call in the nineties for the preservation of family life and values, and his struggle for peace and justice worldwide. Although some would disagree with him on details, no one disagrees with him on the protection of the family and nature's riches, the fight against poverty and oppression, and his opposition to wars without just causes that endanger world peace and security.

The second reason for believing that we have a chance to work together today is the enormity of world problems on a number of vital issues: the environment, globalization, failure of the international system on security, subsistence, and justice, due to lack of international will. Many of us have participated in the past two decades in regional and world conferences on population and developmental issues, and problems relating to scarcity of resources, and this resulted in cooperation between religious groups with beneficial consequences that transcended national, regional, and even international institutions.

Third, we have today a new, easy venue for communication, consultation and coordination of our activities. Previously, material and psychological obstacles stood in the way. Now we realize that we are indispensable to each other, and each one of us could take the initiative and expect support from his partners in conception and in responsibility.

Here I would like to apply the thesis of public theology to the principles of Hans Kung, starting from his third principle, which says: No peace between religions without mutual dialogue. I believe this is a fundamental truth because dialogue results in knowledge and recognition, and humans fear what they do not know. History shows there were close dialogues between us, the followers of the Abrahamic faiths, and among other religions, and these met with varying degrees of success due to theological, historical, and political reasons. We can face the political reasons by adhering to our common values and the principles of international law, and by not identifying ourselves as representatives of the policies of our national states. We also have confronted the historical grievances by apologies and theological change and development.

As for dialogue with non-Abrahamic religions, it suffers from serious obstacles. I read a number of statements by the Dalai Lama after the destruction of the two Buddha Statues in Bamian, Afghanistan, and he was critical of the monopoly of true religious belief and faith claimed by Christians and Muslims. He was not only referring to the attack on the old Buddhist tradition, but also to the fact that Islam and Christianity are missionary faiths that are expanding into previously Buddhist lands. Yet I don't believe there are insurmountable problems with Buddhists and Hindus, although they too suffer from fundamentalism amongst them, especially the Hindus. Of course no one has the right, as a matter of principle, to intervene in the personal or collective belief of a particular group. Yet exclusion, isolation, use of violence, bribery or intimidation against missionary work is unacceptable and must be condemned. There should be a reforming effort to instill openness, a balanced and human vision of the religious other.

Kung's second principle is: No peace between nations without peace between religions. This is true whether it is a matter of fact or perception. Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations and Islam's aggressivity could not be countered successfully after it seemed that Bin Laden's attacks are proof of its validity. Yet I do not see that there remain strong reasons for tension between religions. The missionary drive and expansion into other religions' territory is no longer in existence, and present things are heading towards stability and calm. I believe that frank and open dialogue between different religions will quiet the anxieties, even those of fundamentalist orientations.

The last thesis of Kung says: no human coexistence without an international ethic between nations. The idea of universal or world ethics is strongly present in international organizations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its subsequent conventions and documents. I have already spoken of our failure, we of the Abrahamic faiths, in this domain. The result was the prominence in these declarations and conventions of principles and values based on natural law that believers do not accept as binding or as reflecting basic human nature. The consequence was the emergence of Christian or Islamic declarations of rights in the last three decades, which add to, contradict, or interpret these principles in a different light. Finding common moral and religious ground is possible, as evidenced from the declaration of the World Parliament of Religions in 1993, by starting with a common postulate: mutual knowledge and recognition, and agreed upon goals of freedom, equality, justice, and peace.

Peter Berger has divided the major living religious traditions in the world into three groups. 1) Religions of Semitic origin, which are prophetic in nature like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. 2) Religions of Indian origin, defined by the search for unity through the journey inside the self. And 3) religions of Chinese origin, which revolve

mainly around wisdom. I have tried to determine three mechanisms or criteria that would take account of these main religious traditions, and lead us to the heart of our shared humanity, namely, reason, justice, and morality.

Reason is the organ of knowledge and of deliberation, wisdom and universality. Justice is a principle of balance and harmony between the inner motives of the human soul and human universality. Morals are the great religious and human values enhanced by our faith, our humanity, and our responsibility in order to prevail in our inter-relations, our specific calling, and our common religious obligation. The only way to start a common project via these mechanisms and principles is through dialogue. I hope I have contributed somewhat to clarifying some of its problems and pre-conditions in this lecture.

Mr. President and Respected Audience,

The Holy Quran instructs us when God says “Those who strive in our cause, we show them our ways” (29:69); and “The froth is dispersed, while what benefits people stays on the earth” (13:17). The Quran thus stipulates two conditions for achieving high religious and human value: dedication and the will to benefit people.

I have come from Oman to speak to you in your annual meeting and want to affirm that we share an open attitude towards working for peace and dialogue between religions for the sake of benefit, progress, stability and peace for all people. Parts of our region, where the three Abrahamic faiths originated, are torn by conflicts and wars, and they lack security and stability, justice and peace. There is no way to achieve these ends except by reason, justice and morality. We need these as our foundation so that we may all have life and have it more abundantly. Peace be upon you.