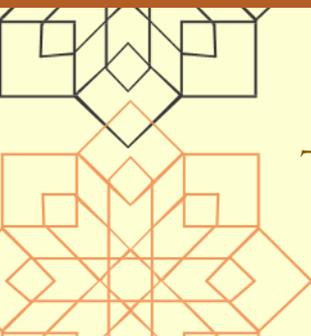


THE UNIFYING FORCE OF RELIGION

H.E DR AHMED AL-TAYYEB



THE MUIS LECTURE 2018





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4 MAY 2018

STAMFORD BALLROOM

RAFFLES CITY CONVENTION CENTRE



Lecture Transcript

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

All praise is due to Allah. May Allah's peace and blessings be upon our Master, Allah's Messenger, his family, and his companions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

May Allah's peace, mercy, and blessings be upon you all!

At the outset, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to the President, the Government and the people of Singapore, for the kind invitation, the warm welcome, and the generous hospitality offered to me and to the accompanying delegation.

I would like to make it clear at the outset of my lecture that my visit to Singapore is not just about visiting Muslims; it is rather a visit to the people of Singapore, both Muslims and non-Muslims. The goal of the visit is to lend my support to your great unity and coexistence and to present you [to others] as a great role model for national and human brotherhood, and for joining hands with each other to maintain a developed and prosperous society.

I came to salute this model that gives the best example in achieving communal harmony and peace between members of the nation and between itself and its neighbouring countries. I pray to God Almighty to make the security and peace of this country last forever, and grant all nations with peace and security.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The conversation about killing people in the name of religion, which is recently known as the phenomenon of terrorism, is a long and sad conversation. To explain it in one lecture or even a few lectures, will surely not suffice. And I believe that if I can explain the innocence of religion, any religion, from these despicable crimes, that is committed in its name and under its banner, then I would have achieved the goal of this visit.

What I say about my own religion applies equally to other divine religions that preceded Islam, which I believe in, and in their prophets, and their divinely-revealed books. I will present my lecture in the form of concise points that build on each other. To support my views, I will cite verses from the Glorious Qur'an whose meanings are clear and undisputed.

The first Qur'ānic reality we come across in our topic is the relationship between Islam and the previous divine religions, particularly those closest to Islam historically, such as Christianity and Judaism before it. In this context, the verses of the Glorious Qur'ān show that there are no different religions in the Qur'ānic worldview; rather there have been numerous divine messages that stand for one religion. In this sense, Islam constitutes the last ring in the chain of a series of divine messages. It should be noted that the word "Islam", which is mentioned only five times in the Qur'ān, and the word "Muslims", do not often refer to the divine message sent to the prophet of Islam in particular, but rather to the divine religion which God has chosen as a means to guide all of humankind until the end of time.

Accordingly, the Qur'ān uses the word "Muslim" to refer to the Prophets Noah, Abraham, Jacob and his children, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (may Allah's peace and blessings be upon them all.)

When Islam reaffirms this through this Qur'ānic principle, we should therefore adopt only one clear understanding from the verses of the Qur'ān, namely the fact that the Qur'ānic term "Islam" applies to one divine religion shared by all the prophets and messengers, the last of which is the religion of Islam, revealed to Prophet Muhammad, the seal of all prophets. Moreover, the Islamic law is identical with the laws of the previous divine messages in many aspects. Undoubtedly, this represents a strong unity between Islam and other divine messages that came before it.

There is another aspect of unity that provides a strong connection between the prophet of Islam and his fellow prophets and messengers who came before him. This connection is the bond of brotherhood, which the prophet of Islam described in the following statement, "I am the nearest of all people to Jesus, the son of Mary. The prophets are paternal brothers; their mothers are different, but their religion is one." In this eloquent metaphor, the one parent that brings together all the prophets is the one divine religion to which they all belong. The different mothers stand for the different times and places they were sent in. The same applies to the connection between the Glorious Qur'ān and the previous divine books as we often come across Qur'ānic verses that tell us that the Gospel affirms and supports the Torah and that the Qur'ān affirms and supports both of them.

The Qur'ān has described each of the Torah of Moses and the Bible of Jesus (peace be upon them) as guidance and light. And due to their unified nature, some Muslim jurists, especially from the Hanafi school, state that as a Muslim is not allowed to touch the Holy Qur'ān unless in a state of purity, likewise a Muslim is not allowed to touch the Torah or the Bible unless in a similar state [i.e. of purity].

The second point is about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Is it a relationship of human brotherhood or that of a mutual hostility? If we look at the answer to this

question in the Glorious Qur'ān, we will find that it is based on three main principles or facts that collectively form the essence of the concept of peace in the Qur'ān.

The first fact is what we may call **universal diversity**. It briefly means that if Allah had wished, he could have created all humankind of the same religion, race, and language. However, Allah has willed to create peoples different in their religions, races, and languages. Allah says in the Qur'ān, *“If your Lord had so willed, He could surely have made humankind one nation (following one religion only). Yet, they will not cease to disagree except one on to whom your Lord has bestowed His Mercy, and for that He created them.”* (The Qur'ān, 11:118-119) The commentators [of the Qur'ān] explain that the word “that” means ‘for the purpose of difference/diversity. He created them as if diversity itself is the divine objective of creation. Peoples’ differences in creeds, races, and language entail differences among them in terms of their understandings, feelings, and their way of thinking. In summary, the Qur'ān affirms that people have different beliefs, thoughts, and behaviours and that such difference is a divine natural law that will last until the Day of Resurrection.

The second fact that is logically based on the first is the **freedom of belief**, which the Qur'ān has provided for man regardless of which belief one adopts, and whether it is related to the true divine religion or not. Freedom of belief is the other side of the fact of difference. It is not plausible in the light of the divine wisdom that God informs us that He has created his servants of different religions and at the same time orders us to make them adopt one religion by revoking their freedom of belief. This would be a sort of absurdity that does not fit the wisdom of Allah Almighty. In addition, if there was a Qur'ānic statement that attested to the difference of belief, and another statement that denied such a difference, that would entail contradiction in the Glorious Qur'ān. Of course, this is totally unimaginable as it does not fit in with the divine wisdom and justice.

The Qur'ān has plenty of verses that provide for the freedom of belief, including, *“Then whosoever wills, let him believe, and whosoever wills let him disbelieve.”* (The Qur'ān, 18:29); *“There is no compulsion in religion.”* (The Qur'ān, 2:256). When the Prophet (peace be upon him) sent one of his companions with a letter to the people of Yemen, he stated in his letter, which was a constitution for the people of Yemen, that “... whoever dislikes Islam, from the Jews or Christians, he shall not be asked to change his religion.”

The third fact is called **mutual acquaintance and integration**. It means that the relationship among those who are different but have their own freedom of belief cannot be based on conflict and hegemony. That is because the relationship of conflict means eliminating the other who is different, and this relationship ends only by annihilating one of the conflicting parties for one's own interests, and imposing a unilateral vision or culture on others. In this context, the Glorious

Qur'ān affirms that the relationships among people within the right to difference should be a relationship of acquaintance, one that is based on peace, cooperation, and integration.

Therefore, it is of a blatant ignorance of Islam and of the Glorious Qur'ān, to claim that a Muslim's relationship with a non-Muslim or a disbeliever is based on hostility and bloodshed, or to claim that Islam is a religion of the sword that slaughters, chases, and compels others to adopt the religion. As we have studied in the field of Islamic Law at the University of Al-Azhar, the reason to engage in warfare is not unbelief, and any cause of killing others in Islam should not be their being non-Muslims, but aggression against Muslims [because of their religion]. Leading Muslim scholars and jurists have refuted all other claims or opinions on the subject, based on clear evidence from the religious texts and sound arguments.

They further argued that the only situation in which a Muslim must carry his arms and fight others is the case of aggression by others against Muslims, whether this is an aggression against religion, land, property, or honour. This is the right to self-defence, which has been made legitimate by all the laws of truth and justice. Because the war in Islam is an exception, Allah has forbidden Muslims, if they were called on to fight, to go beyond the right to defend themselves. Allah even calls the act of going beyond the limits of self-defence an aggression. Allah says in the Glorious Qur'ān, *"Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress the limits. Truly, Allah does not like the transgressors."* (The Qur'ān, 2:190) Thus, fighting in the cause of Allah has its constraints and values which if a Muslim fails to observe, he is then considered a transgressor. Indeed, Allah hates those who transgress.

Let us further contemplate the first Qur'ānic verse that gives the Muslims a permission to fight their enemies, *"The ones who are fought are permitted [to defend themselves] for that they are unjustly attacked; surely Allah is Ever-Determiner over giving them victory. Those who have been driven out of their homes unfairly [for no other reason] except that they say, "Our Lord is Allah." And had it not been the repelling by Allah of humankind, some by the means of others, indeed there would have been completely demolished hermitages, churches, oratories, and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is much mentioned. Allah will definitely give victory to whoever vindicates Him. Surely Allah is Ever-Powerful, Ever-Mighty."* (The Qur'ān, 22:39-40)

This verse clearly proves that the first reason for the legitimacy of fighting in Islam is to support the oppressed and to enable them to enjoy a safe life like others. It shows that Islam makes fighting obligatory to defend the heavenly religions, not only the religion of Islam, against the aggression of their enemies. This is understood from the mention of the houses of worship of the Jews and Christians, beside the mosque, which is the house of worship of Muslims.

The evidence that **war is only permitted under the Islamic law for resisting aggression, and not to force people to accept Islam**, consists of two elements.

First, in the case of the countries that were conquered by Muslims, their citizens were given two options: either to accept Islam if they wished, or to keep their religions, rituals, places of worship, customs and traditions. This is a clear religious injunction which we all as students of religion have learnt. Muslims offered them a pledge on the state protection of their freedom of belief and their churches/places of worship. Those who opted not to accept Islam were treated in accordance with the rule that states, “They [i.e. non-Muslims] have the same rights and obligations as Muslims”. History did not record a single case in which the Muslims entered a country and gave its people the option to either accept Islam or be killed or forcibly displaced.

Second, Islam forbids a Muslim who has to fight his enemies from killing children, women, the weak and disabled, the blind, monks, farmers, and craftsmen. The reason why a Muslim is not permitted to kill such groups of people is that they do not take up arms and thus do not constitute a direct threat or aggression against Muslims. We read in the commands of the leaders of Muslim armies [in the history of Islam] about the prohibition of killing animals owned by the enemies’ army, except for a dire need for food. Likewise, they also forbade soldiers from burning trees, dispersing bees, and demolishing buildings and houses [in the army’s territory].

Ladies and gentlemen,

To summarise my remarks about Islam in this gathering, I would say that Islam is the religion of peace, not only among Muslims, but between Muslims and non-Muslims. Allah sent the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) as a mercy to the worlds. Allah Almighty says, “*We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds.*” (The Qur’ān 21:107) The word “worlds” refer to four categories, namely human beings, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. And we have touched on the prohibition of killing animals belonging to the enemy, and this is a mercy to animals; prohibition of burning trees or uprooting plants, this is a mercy to plants; prohibition of destroying houses “and do not ever destroy a building”, this is also a mercy to the non-living things.

There is a lot of discussion on why Islam prohibits transgression against these worlds, despite them being the worlds of non-living things, plants and animals. We may assume that they are not respectable. However, these beings, or the whole universe, in the language of the Holy Qur’ān, are not dead but have their own life. This is stated in the Qur’ān, that everything in the heavens and earth pray to God. “*Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth exalts Allah*”, “*and certainly we gave David bounty from us, O mountains repeat praises with him and the birds*” (The Qur’ān 34:10). This means, to say prayers repeatedly. The prophet David (peace be upon him) used to say prayers and the mountains and the birds would repeat after

him. Another verse states *“and there is nothing in the heavens and earth expect it say prayers and praises unto Him but you do not comprehend their prayers”*. Therefore, these beings are respectable because they are also servants of God along with humankind, praying to God day and night. And therefore they are respectable, and it is forbidden to transgress against them, except for necessity such as for food, as mentioned above.

A Muslim who follows the way of his Prophet should be **a source of mercy to himself, to Muslims, and to everyone**. If Islam is a religion of peace to all the worlds, then it is very logical that it forbids bloodshed and only makes an exception when the rights of others have been transgressed. Thus, those who kill people in the name of Islam are real criminals and corruptors of the earth and the punishment for doing so is well established in the Qur’ān. Indeed, Islam is a religion of ease in terms of its beliefs, laws, and rulings. Allah has affirmed such ease in two places in the Glorious Qur’ān. *“He [Allah] has not laid any hardship upon you in religion”*; *“Allah wishes for you ease and not hardship”*. (The Qur’ān, 22:78 and 5:6)

Islam is a religion of human brotherhood. [The fourth Caliph of Islam] Imam Ali, (may Allah be pleased with him) advises Muslims saying, *“people are either your brothers in religion or your equal in humanity.”* If religious brotherhood entails certain rights and obligations, human brotherhood, too, requires certain rights and obligations, which should be observed.

Islam is a religion that forbids excessiveness and austereness, and warns against **extremism in [religious] understanding as this leads to restrictions in the practice of God’s religion, when the religion of God is characterised by ease, not burden nor complication**. And Islam honours the people of the Book, especially the followers of Jesus (peace be upon him) describing them as the ones who have most love for Muslims from amongst the people of the Book. The Holy Qur’ān describes that God has placed in their heart compassion and mercy: *“Then We sent following their footsteps Our messengers and followed [them] with Jesus, the son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel. And We placed in the hearts of those who followed him compassion and mercy and monasticism, which they innovated.”* (The Qur’ān 57:27) And the Qur’ān is fair towards the pious from the people of the Book: *“They are not [all] the same; among the People of the Scripture is a community standing [in obedience], reciting the verses of Allah during periods of the night and prostrating [in prayer]. They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and hasten to good deeds. And those are among the righteous.”* (The Qur’ān 3:113 and 114)

The Prophet (peace be upon him) has forbidden Muslims from hurting or oppressing the People of the Book. He says, *“Beware, if anyone wrongs a Mu’wahid [a person who is granted the pledge of protection by Muslims], diminishes his right, forces him to work beyond his capacity, or takes from him anything without his consent, I shall be his disputant on the Day of Judgment.”* In another hadith, he said, *“Whoever kills a Mu’wahid shall not smell the fragrance of Paradise, though its fragrance can be smelt at a distance of forty years [of traveling].”*

I am puzzled by those who do not eat from the food of the People of the Book while they read in the Qur'ān, *“Today, the good things are made lawful for you, and the food of the ones to whom the Book was given is lawful to you, and your food is made lawful to them.”* (Qur'ān, 5:5) It is the Muslim's right to make sure that the meat he is served was taken from a slaughtered animal, so he may eat from it, or otherwise he may not eat from it.

I am puzzled when some people forbid congratulating Christians on their festivities while they frequently recite the following verse, *“And so [allowed for you to marry] are believing women in wedlock, and in wedlock women of (the ones) to whom the Scripture was given even before you.”* (Qur'ān, 5:5) This means that Allah has made it permissible for Muslim men to marry chaste women from among the People of the Book. Is it reasonable that Allah makes it permissible for a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman and to show her affection and passion while forbidding him from congratulating her on her Christian festivities?

You may ask: What about a Muslim's relationship with non-Muslims who do not belong to the People of the Book?

The answer to this question is found in the Qur'ān. *“Allah does not forbid you (as regards) the ones who have not fought you on account of the religion and have not driven you out of your residences that you should be kind to them and be equitable towards them; surely Allah loves the just.”* (Qur'ān, 60:8) Thus, Islam requires a Muslim to deal with all people with kindness and justice because Allah loves those who adopt these manners in their treatment of others.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In contemporary times, it is very important to correctly understand the Qur'ān and the Hadiths of the Prophet first before we apply them in life. It is very important for Muslims living in non-Muslim societies or in multi-religious and multi-ethnic communities to **positively integrate** into their communities. What this means is that they should adhere to practices that preserve their faith, that uphold the laws of Islam, and also become active members of their societies, contribute to their development, and respect the laws, other religions, beliefs and cultures. You should know that showing respect of others' beliefs does not at all mean adopting their religious beliefs. I am required to respect, and at the same time I am required to preserve my faith.

A Muslim is required to engage in a positive dialogue with others following the Qur'ān's instruction, *“And engage with them in the best way.”* (The Qur'ān, 16:125) We should know that there should be no arguments on the beliefs of each community/religion because that would lead to endless conflict. We should rather look for common grounds between believers and non-believers. Indeed, Allah has created us to be acquainted with each other and not to engage in hostile disputes or kill each other.

I admire very much the statement of [an early scholar of Islam] Abu Amr Ibn Salah (d. 643 AH) (may Allah rest his soul in peace) in support of his opinion that it is forbidden for a Muslim to kill peaceful non-Muslims, “Allah would not create them only to order us to kill them”. It would be a sort of absurdity that does not befit God’s infallible wisdom. Indeed, Ibn Salah’s statement points to the following Qur’ānic verse, “*He is the One Who created you; then some of you are disbelieving and some others are believing; and Allah is Ever-Beholding of whatever you do.*” (The Qur’ān, 64:2) In this verse, God mentions the word “disbelieving” before the word “believing”, the wisdom of which, according to the Qur’ānic commentators, is that the disbelievers typically outnumber the believers.

These are the points I have attempted to cover in my lecture. I know I have taken a long time but I was encouraged by your kind patience and attentive listening. Indeed, Allah has prepared a great reward for those who are patient.

Thank you!

May Allah’s Peace, Mercy, and Blessings be upon you all!

Q & A Segment

Q: What are your views on Huntington's idea of the "clash of civilisations" as I feel that it may be happening now?

Grand Imam: [The author] Mr. Huntington is not a thinker or a scholar, but speaks from a political viewpoint. And we know that politics praise today what they criticise tomorrow. Their views may not be based on facts or reality. As we have said [earlier in the lecture] that God Almighty created humankind with differences in cultures, belief systems, emotions, and even in fingerprints; there are no two fingerprints that are the same. Mr. Huntington wants to swim against the will of God Almighty, and gather people in a single culture and economy which they call it the "culture of the centre and its periphery", with him sitting in the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery revolving in an orbit around it, and after the civilisations had clashed, he searched for the strongest opponent and found none other than Islam. According to him, it is the last and final opponent, after which normalcy will resume. Before that it was said the lost paradise was found in Marxism, and, of course, everyone applauded. [In essence], the clash between societies will lead to a society with only one class where everyone will be equal and there will be no clashes, and this will be paradise. This theory barely lasted for 50 years before it was turned on its head. We have to turn to the divine books because the words in the divine books are spoken by the One who knows. *"How could He not know His Own creation? For He alone is the Most Subtle, All-Aware."* (The Qur'ān, 67: 14) Otherwise, there are ideas which are not based on principles nor do they agree with religious principles.

I would assure you that when the western civilisation excludes religion from being a source [of its civilisation], it leads to misery for its own people. Look at what is happening to the Middle East. Are such wars fit for the 21st century that is meant to be led by this civilisation, or directed by it? The Middle Ages did not witness such levels of negligence with people and with lives.

Q: In April 2017, your Eminence had a Christian-Muslim dialogue in Egypt with the World Council of Churches. Professor Heidi Hadsell from the Hartford Seminary talked about the need for the capacity to cross borders and boundaries, especially boundaries of religious communities, and that is one of the most important attributes of leadership. What is your idea of religious leaders and how are they going to be able to cross boundaries if they stay within their walls?

Grand Imam: I believe that the answer was mentioned in my speech. I explained that the relationship between Islam and other religions is clear - that there are no borders between religions. In fact, there is only one religion taught by prophets and messengers from Adam to Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon them). There is only one cause (which this religion promotes), which is [a set of] creed and morals, agreed by all scholars. This religion may differ in laws as a result of the demands of, and development in, time and place. But the religion as a set of creed and morals remains the same. So we cannot say 'bring the religions closer' because there are no [multiple] religions.

But there are religious leaders who have politicised religion and this is the problem and the big danger. This is especially when they exploit religion to justify colonisation or dominance over others, for the sake of one nation to live and another to die.

As the questioner may know, Al-Azhar went to the Vatican to meet the representative of Christianity in Europe and the world, and within a few minutes, the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar became very close as if they came from the same mother, as they say. We felt the same way when we visited the International Council of Churches. Likewise, when we went to the Church of Canterbury, and Bishop Welby hosted me for 3 days at the Lambeth Palace, we definitely felt the close bond between us – the bond of one single religion.

Q: If we were to look ahead ten years from now, what would we need to put in place with regards to religious and secular education to ensure that our children are not traumatised by violence and can live peacefully? And how would you enable this for Muslims and what is your advice for non-Muslims?

Grand Imam: This is a very important question. It appears that the questioner is aware of the dangers of a totally secular education, and what human tragedies that has led to, both in the East and West. The problem is that the modern civilisation is an incomplete and reckless civilisation, because it rejected religion and God. It declared the death of God Almighty, as you find in Nietzsche's philosophy. According to his philosophy, strength is attained only when religion and general morals that serve the oppressed, the destitute, the poor, the miserable, and the weak, are removed.

Such a civilisation lacks morals to guide it towards goodness and warn it against evil. It was developed based on materialism and consumerism, on feeding certain interests and satisfying desires, and gaining strength through dominance, weapons, and profiting from arms trade. This means some countries live on 'blood' – arms are exported and new markets are created by creating turmoil between peaceful and stable nations. Such war markets mean that those who

manufacture weapons live on the blood and limbs of others. This is unprecedented in human history. The reason is because the modern civilisation has lost its way. It lost its way when it rejected God and morality. Humankind cannot return to that calmness, tranquillity and peace unless this civilisation changes.

In the last 10 years or so, they looked for morals as an alternative to religion - morals called the “general morals” or “inter-continental morals”. Religion was excluded, and therefore, these morals lost its reference point that can function like its ruler or balancing scale. Thus, the morals clashed, what I see good for me is seen as bad by others. The clashes recommence, and therefore the 21st century man continues to suffer in misery because of these floundering civilisations. In my view, and I think I am a man who reads and thinks, that as long as this civilisation does not return to a morality of divine origins, there is no hope for the end of the misery of humankind in the modern era.

Q: We have a very diverse religious community in Singapore. There is a significant proportion, almost as many as there are Muslims, who do not profess any religion and whose belief system does not have a faith in religion or God. One of the concerns is that while we work on interreligious and interfaith unity, we may inadvertently exclude those who do not subscribe to any religious belief and who have rejected divinity. How we could reach out to such groups? How do we have an engaging conversation with those among us who do not have a religion, or any organised faith?

Grand Imam: I have mentioned briefly in the lecture that Man has two types of relationships – brotherhood in religion and in humanity – the latter is even bigger. As [the fourth Caliph in Islam] Imam Ali said: “People are either your brother in religion or your counterpart in humanity.” God has honoured humankind: “*Indeed, We have honoured the children of Adam, carried them on land and sea, granted them good and lawful provisions, and privileged them far above many of Our creatures.*” (Qur’ān 17:70). This brotherhood in humanity has its rights and duties between all people. So it does not mean that I should only have dialogue with people of religion. On the contrary, the Qur’ān said: “*Allah does not forbid you from dealing kindly and fairly with those who have not fought you because of religion.*” (Qur’ān 60:8). It does not say ‘those who have not fought you because of religion from the people of religions, rather it said in general ‘those who have not fought you because of religion’, whether he is a Muslim, Christian, non-Muslim, or even those without religion, that we ought “to deal with them kindly and fairly”. Therefore, there are many commonalities shared between people, whether one belongs or associates oneself with a religion or otherwise. This is what a Muslim must work on.

There are challenges common to all: poverty, disease, famine, vanity, arrogance. It is very important for all communities and different groups to come together to overcome these challenges and to work with each other. There is ample evidence both in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic traditions and examples which calls upon Muslims and believers to help those who have been wronged, and those who have been victims of injustice, an act which the Prophet (peace be upon him) says, “carries a greater reward than one who worships in the mosque”.

The Qur'ān speaks about the destitute, the poor and the oppressed. These are the problems that we must all talk about. And a Muslim must take the first initiative to work towards helping those in need. It is not necessary for him to convert others to Islam (when he does good), but simply to benefit humanity. A human being is never void of goodness whatever his belief is. The positive values that are taught in Islam must be lived by Muslims. We must continue to work, Muslims with non-Muslims, and we should not be exclusive in our outlook and exclude others groups. On the contrary, Islam asks that everyone work together to provide a better life for all.

I always remember and reflect upon two Prophetic traditions; the story of a man who saw a dog almost dying of thirst. He then went down a well and filled his shoe with water to offer it to the dog. Because of this charitable act and compassion in his heart, God forgive all his sins and placed him in paradise. Imagine the reward if I offer this kindness to my brother in humanity regardless of religion?

The second Prophetic tradition concerns a woman who fasted during the day and prayed at night, which is not an easy act to accomplish. When the Prophet (peace be upon him) knew of her death, he said that the lady who had fasted all her days and prayed all her nights but had also hurled hurtful words to her neighbours, thus there was thus no good in her, and she received God's punishment and wrath in the hellfire. The other example is of a woman who only performed her obligatory prayers but used her wealth for charity and she did not hurt her neighbours in any form and shape. That woman was rewarded with paradise.

Indeed, God loves charitable acts and generosity. But generosity is not meant only between Muslims. The reward for helping non-Muslims is the same. On this basis, the Hanafi school (one of the four schools of law in Islam) views that the alms of a Muslim may be given to a poor *dhimmi* [a non-Muslim in Muslim lands]. It can be used to support them and to ensure their wellbeing.

Q: Using the analogy of a football match with opposing teams and fans where security measures would be needed to avoid clashes between them, how did the Arab and Indian Muslim

traders in the 16th and 17th centuries manage to bring Islam to this region (and along it diversity) without confrontation nor the need for security measures?

Grand Imam: With regards to the examples of the traders who brought Islam to the region, what worked was the portrayal of true Islam – that people can see its natural beauty when it is presented without distortion. When it is exploited by preachers, the results will be the opposite; clashes, disagreements, and separation, as we may see today. The traders were simple and trustworthy people, trustworthy in conveying the message of Islam, and hence, they succeeded. People saw in their actions the beauty of Islam. Today, we need examples and role models [i.e. action] to show what Islam is rather than more talk.

Q: I thank Your Eminence for pointing out that the main reason for the current crisis is the exploitation of religion by politicians everywhere for negative ends and at various times. I also know that Egypt, through Al-Azhar, has begun to develop religious discourse. Has there been any progress made in this regard? How far have you succeeded in developing and advancing this positive religious discourse?

Grand Imam: There is a context behind the call for the renewal of religious discourse. Recently, there has been an assault on the message of Islam, the reduction of Islam to rules and laws which give away a wrong and distorted image of Islam to the non-Muslim world. Thus, there were groups who have tried to challenge this image, pointing out that such an image of Islam is incorrect and unwarranted. They have received the attention of the media and therefore this has become a real concern on the ground for a lot of Muslim communities.

Muslims want to really understand what Islam is, or how Islam guides them to lead their daily life, so this has made it all the more important for religious leaders to play their role to guide Muslim communities. The people have made demands that “we want the scholars to go down to the streets, and come to us with a modern discourse that we can understand, not talk to us about incomprehensible rulings or laws.” And part of the outcome of such assaults on Islam is essentially, the misguided sense that Islam is synonymous with backwardness, violence, and terrorism, which, then led to Islamophobia, and which has even resulted in some attacks on Al-Azhar and its message. It is thus important that we renew this message and religious discourse to bring it to the masses so that they understand correctly what religion demands of them in this contemporary context.

An example is the views of [a 13th century renowned Muslim scholar] Ibn Taymiyyah. Some of his views were expressed in very specific historical contexts – such as on war when the Tartars and Mongols attacked Muslims, and his use of terminologies like *kafir* (infidels) was

in the very specific context of war and killing - they had just encountered attacks by the Crusaders on a daily basis, where about three thousand Muslims were killed in one day. Thus, these terminologies and words were used, which were appropriate for that context, in order to bring Muslims' attention to the right and appropriate response, such as it is unlawful to cooperate with the *kafir* because Muslims were being murdered by them. In such an environment, jurists came up with exceptional rules, rather than normative ones, in order to deal with the kind of challenges they faced. However, there have been groups in recent years that have exploited such historical views and want to impose these teachings on Muslim communities today. This, of course, is not suited to our context - we are not, for example, facing any Crusades. We don't have such assaults on Muslim communities around the world.

Thus, it is important for us to renew this religious discourse to explain such historical views and texts that must be read appropriately and correctly to Muslim communities. This can help us solve contemporary problems, such as on the place and rights of women. We know that there are still issues with the rights of woman in some parts of the Muslim world. Some Muslim communities are afraid to talk about reforms in personal laws. It is important for us to think about and discuss such issues - that women should be able to work and integrate well in society, and that women are valuable members of the society.

These are very important things, but it is also important to underline the fact that we do not compromise our religious principles. There are Islamic principles that we must hold on to. The renewal of religious discourse does not mean we dilute the religion to the extent that the principles are totally ignored or changed.

For example, it is not right to demand the exact or same culture in Muslim communities as that which exist in the West. They should not expect Muslim women to be like Western women, or our streets to look like European streets in terms of women and relationships, and freedom and abortion. Obviously, such things cannot be renewed because they lead, instead, to the destruction of religious discourse. We must be aware of these differences, but maintain the project to renew the religious discourse so that we can continue to guide our Muslim communities appropriately.

Dr. Maliki: In that context, it is useful to bring the discussion back to the Muslim community in Singapore to focus more on the issues faced here, where we can get some guidance from His Eminence on how we can continue to move forward as a Muslim minority in a modern city like Singapore.

Q: You have established that religion is indeed a unifying force but religion cannot play its role as a unifying force so long as religious extremism exists. So how would you suggest that religious extremism be combated?

Grand Imam: Before we answer this question, we must understand the reasons for radicalisation or extremism. I am specifically referring to the phenomenon in the Arab world. There have been a lot of cases of misguided thought and ideologies.

Some have singled out Islam or religion in general as a source of this radicalisation and extremism. However, I think it is very difficult to say that religion or reasons specific to particular countries or communities are the only causes of radicalisation. There have been those who have indeed exploited religious teachings and ideologies to justify their extremist acts and extremist ideologies, by using past juristic thought, Qur'ānic references and Prophetic traditions, to attack others and call them infidels.

Therefore, the most important thing that we must do is to monitor our religious curriculum, and to also reform this curriculum and learning approaches. For example, the *takfeer* ideology (to consider another Muslim as an infidel because you disagree with his beliefs and his practices) is very dangerous, because the ideology will lead to killing, once we regard someone else as an infidel and consider his blood as legitimate (i.e. he can be killed).

In view of the existence of such dangerous ideologies, we must make sure that we monitor religious curriculum and purge from it all forms of extremism and exclusivism - especially to not allow the teaching of the rejection of others who are different from us. Such a [positive] curriculum has been taught in the University of Al-Azhar and its institutions at all levels.

We, for example, celebrate the fact that there are different views, which is the tradition within the Islamic intellectual thought. The student of Al-Azhar is taught to embrace openness and plurality in views and appreciate the dialogical nature of Islamic thought. We see this in how classical works are written. An author writes the main text (which is usually brief) but there are commentaries upon commentaries of this main text (comparable to footnotes). In the process of writing commentaries of this text, some commentators may affirm the views of the original author but they might also dispute such views. They investigate the claims of the original author and offer their observations. So, one can engage with the diversity of views, which is, in essence, the mentality of dialogue.

Therefore, we must reform our Islamic education to adopt and acculturate this culture of dialogue so we are able to engage with the plurality of views in Islam. The danger begins when we do not allow others to express their views on religious matters. This is against the Muslim tradition that we have learned both from Muslim texts over twelve centuries or so, and in the development of Islamic learning over time. There is an urgent need for this, but there are also other reasons for terrorism.

For example, is terrorism purely an ideological movement? Or is it an ideological movement and an armed movement at the same time, which deals with weapons, sale of petrol, training, in arms etc.? Who is responsible to respond to terrorism in this form, not in its religious/spiritual form? Of course, this is not the role of scholars.

Q: As a Singaporean Muslim, sectarianism does not resonate with me. In fact, we thrive in a multireligious and multiracial setting in Singapore. We respect each other and work together with diverse groups of people here as we build a nation. Unfortunately, since the fall of Iraq in 2004 up till today, sectarianism was and has been really devastating where the innocent have been affected and displaced, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Unfortunately, in this region, my sense is that some Muslims have also joined this bandwagon of sectarianism, where they believe that a certain strand of Islam, and I'm referring to the Shia school, must be demonised and targeted as a legitimate enemy of Islam. How do I convince Muslims here in Singapore and in this region that, indeed, religion is a unifying force, and we must therefore reject sectarianism as we do not want such a religious and political divide to engulf our peaceful country and region?

Grand Imam: On the issue of the tensions or the differences between the Sunni and the Shia communities, we find the most prominent manifestation of this in countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Sunnis and Shias have lived together for fourteen centuries. The real difference between them is essentially in the understanding [and interpretation] of some of the teachings of Islam, and these are normal differences. But the problem is when these differences lead to unjust acts and aggression towards the other community – when one desires to remove another community and their rights to exist. When the society explodes into two camps, and Sunnism and Shiism is used as a way to initiate clashes, than that is not Sunnism nor Shiism but a hijacking to divide and break the region up, to the extent that we have heard about a new Middle East. The late Sheikh Shaltuut, a former Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, talked about bringing different school of thoughts (*mazhab*), including the Sunni and the Shia school of thoughts, together. This is the stand of Al-Azhar as an institution, and we teach the Shia school too.

It is very important that differences in some of the teachings should not break up Muslims into different factions and groups. It is totally not in our interest if Muslims are divided into two groups or clashing with each other. But we have been blamed for all these, and there have been calls for Muslims to freeze or render irrelevant some verses of the Qur'ān, some said around 18 verses in the Qur'ān, in light of some of these difficult tensions that have really led to problems in some parts of the Muslim world.

Differences can really weaken communities. As such, it should be the priority of Muslims to overcome many other important social issues, such as unemployment for young Muslims. In some parts of the Muslim world, when someone does not have a job, he chooses to become a preacher, but he breaks up and causes disunity amongst Muslim communities by extolling the virtues of one group over another, and that leads to tension. This also happens between the Sunni and Shia communities. It is thus important for us to resolve the issue of differences by allowing dialogue to take place. We have seen various incidents between countries such as Iraq and Iran. When these conflicts and tensions happen, the real losers at the end of the day are Muslims. It is more productive for us to fight against problems such as illiteracy and ignorance. Yet, a lot of the resources of the Muslim world have been used to fight each other. We should redirect these resources to fight other kinds of illnesses and diseases like illiteracy and ignorance.

We have to rely on our youth, the generation of the student who asked this question, to stress the message of helping one another in doing good, in charitable and pious acts, and to not let those who want to exploit differences to get their chance at breaking up communities. [As mentioned in the lecture earlier], there is only one religion but with different sets of laws. When we look at the example of the European Union, despite the differences in their races and ethnicities, they are able to agree on a common goal for the entire region. It is a very huge region with lots of differences but there is a framework that is able to unite them. If the European Union is able to make that project a success, what more the Arab world? Are we lesser than the European Union to have a plan to live a respectable life? And now, you have social media with which you can connect to the whole world. So let there be amongst you someone who calls towards goodness in this matter.

Q: How could Singaporean Muslims be good Muslims and manage life in a secular world and secular system? Given the increasing influence of rather extreme views through the Internet and the social media, how could Muslims in Singapore manage these challenges? For example, some Muslims prefer not to take up jobs which require certain protocols, such as Muslim women who choose not to go for certain employment because they cannot put on the hijab [tudung or headscarf].

Grand Imam: There are two main types of secularism - a tolerant secularism and a combative secularism. The latter rejects all forms of religion and religious elements in their societies, and makes the religious communities feel like strangers in the society. This form of intolerant secularism which combats religion needs to be ideologically challenged on the basis of freedom of religious practice. For Muslim women, whoever wants to wear hijab [headscarf] should be equally respected as those who do not want to. But there are of course tolerant forms of

secularism in certain societies or communities. In such societies, we see friends and colleagues, in schools, universities, and other places where some may practise Islam whilst some others may not, so some may cover their hair, and some may not.

On the issue of hijab, there are types of work which require women to take off the hijab. If a Muslim woman is able to keep the hijab on and finds another job, this is preferred. Of course, no one disputes that hijab (to cover hair) is obligatory. But if a woman goes against this law, does it mean that she enters hellfire or loses her religion/becomes a *kafir*?

The answer is no. This is a transgression of a religious law. God may choose to punish or forgive her, as He may with any other sin. This is not like drinking intoxicants or disobeying parents, which are major sins in Islam.

If she does not have a choice but to take up that job because she has to take care of her children [for example], then this is considered an exigency in which she can take off her hijab at work, and put it back on when she is free [from the uniform requirement] and leaves office. This is based on a maxim in Muslim jurisprudence that there are exigencies that permit prohibitions.

Chairman Dr. Maliki: Ladies and gentlemen. I think we have had a very insightful evening listening to the wisdom of our Eminent speaker, Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayyeb. I think you agree with me that time is never enough for us to be able to continue to engage Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb but we have to end. All good things will have to come to a close. I want you to join me in thanking Sheikh Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayyeb for his frank sharing, sharing with us so generously of his insights. He has covered many areas from issues of diversity to moderation to how Islam embraces different communities and how we can all continue to work together. There are many challenges facing us today in the modern world, in the Islamic world, but we have to continue to have this discourse for us to move forward and ensure that we maintain peace and stability for humankind. So if you could join me in thanking His Eminence Dr. Ahmad Al-Tayyeb for his excellent lecture as well as for sharing with us his wisdom this evening.
