

CLOSING SPEECH - US ISLAMIC WORLD FORUM 2014

Respected ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues. I thank the organizers for the US Islamic World Forum 2014 to give me the opportunity to conclude this important event.

وما أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

And We have sent you (O Muhammad) not but as a mercy for the Alameen (mankind, jinns and all that exists)”

I begin with this verse from the holy quran from Surah al-Anbiya’ [21:107]. Firstly, there is no clearer message than this that covers every aspect of what it means to live a muslim life that is MERCY, MERCY for all that exists.

We have to remind ourselves at the end of this inspiring gathering of intellectuals and activists from the broad spectrum of Muslims from around the world that ISLAM and its conversation with Europe and America is nothing new.

There have been many an occasion in the past where our beloved prophet Muhammad has been part of the conversation of what it means to be European and American in medieval and early modern history. Poets like Goethe and Emerson have been in conversation with the central organizing text of Islamic life that is the Holy Quran.

Moreover, there have been both positive and negative perceptions perpetuated of our beloved prophet Muhammad, the central focus of reverence and imitation for the world wide Muslim community.

There are historically rooted prejudices in European literature from Milton's Paradise Lost, to the tale of the three imposters and the more recent Satanic Verses that all depict our prophet in a negative light.

Yet these negative perceptions were fundamentally important for Europeans to understand who they were in opposition to the Muslim other that was conceived as the enemy by both church and state.

We are reminded again and again by the best exemplars of ALL our religions that the first step in leading a religiously sincere life is to begin by getting rid of prejudice against our fellow human beings.

THIS is the basis of living an ethical life. We also have to begin by not looking down upon our brothers and sisters who share our own faith and who we consider less mature and developed intellectually, physically or economically than our selves. This is also the starting point for an ecumenical feeling or the feeling of belonging to one ummah.

SECONDLY, I remind you that Islam is nothing but a socially transformative project. Our beloved prophet attracted much hatred in his enemies because he wanted to transform society on the basis of ethics and justice. Qatar's position in the world and in the region is a hall mark for living upto the prophetic call of justice to be established where possible otherwise reconciliation must be attempted.

We heard plenary discussions on Syria and Palestine where we morally support the aspiration of the masses even if they are against the rulers or occupiers of those countries. There is no shortcut to dealing with extremism other than through tackling injustice in society

We believe in speaking truth to those with power and hope that we inspire others to do the same in their respective contexts. We also implore to our fellow Muslims to not transgress the boundaries of

ISLAMIC ETHICS OF MODERATION, which is a model that Qatar has lived upto and continues to aspire towards.

We are developing strategies of facilitation between parties who have been at conflict. Our recent interventions in Libya, Afghanistan and Central African Republic are examples of such facilitations. At the end of the day the real lasting solutions lie in the hands of the people themselves. No external force can do more than facilitate peace.

I quote here the American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's treatise on "heroism" that begins with an epigraph from our prophet Muhammad's statement that "Paradise is under the shadow of swords."

Emerson, however, did not perceive our prophet Muhammad as a violent prophet as many contemporary critics of Islam believe. He instead portrayed the prophet of Islam as a man of self-control: He says "Every great and commanding moment in the annals of the world is the triumph of some enthusiasm. The victories of the Arabs after [Muhammad], who in a few years, from a small and mean beginning, established a larger empire than that of Rome, is an example." Here Emerson advocates that the ascendancy of Islam was not due to "the sword" and violent expeditions of expansion, but rather faith in God and the universal appeal that so many people find in Islam.

Thirdly, I remind you that the message of Islam is ALL INCLUSIVE and is for the greatest good of all. Here in doha we are attempting to create a society based on Islamic principles that attempts at including perspectives and experiences from around the world in our effort to create a just and modern society. I refer back to Emerson's theory of "oneness" which is most clear in his essay "Over-soul," in which he argued that mankind should be united like "the water of the globe, [being] all one, and, truly seen, its tide is one."

The topic of the soul is in fact one of the main sources of truth and the catalyst of spiritual growth for Emerson: "Within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal One." I end with the poem by Goethe, the famous German poet who says in his universal message cutting across the "clash of cultures":

God is in the west

God is in the east

Northern and Southern Islands

Rest in his hands peace

This was surely inspired by the Quranic verse with which I end my remarks from Surah Baqarah [2:115]

وَاللَّهُ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُولَّوْا فَتَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

To GOD belongs the east and the west; wherever you go there will be the presence of GOD

I would like to highlight also the work of the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue which has been working since 2007 in the field of promoting co-existence between followers of different faiths and those with none. We have hosted 11 annual conferences on a wide spectrum of themes including youth empowerment, social media, freedom of religion, solidarity and education. We have worked in conflict zones like the Balkans and we have spread the message of interfaith dialogue outside closed sessions and into the mainstream of society.

We hope the participants will take this interfaith friendly message of Qatar and the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue to their respective homes. I wish you safe return journeys in Gods protection.

Thank you.

Dr. Ibrahim Saleh Al-Naimi

Chairman

Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue