

IFF INAUGURAL LECTURE
'BUILDING BRIDGES – THE IMPORTANCE OF
INTERFAITH DIALOGUE'

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LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

Our world has become increasingly intolerant and polarised on the basis of economics, race, ethnicity, culture and most sadly – religion.

As we know, religion can be a force for peace or war, it can heal or hurt. It can create or destroy on a scale unimaginable to previous generations. History has recorded enough bloodshed in the name of religion. Moses, who led his people from slavery to the brink of the Promised Land, gave them a choice:

“See I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life so that you and your children may live”.

When extremists inflict violence on society in the name of religion, it is often the innocent who are their main victims. This must be resisted by the community at large. Voices must be raised in protest. We must withhold the robe of sanctity when it is sought as a cloak for violence and bloodshed, even if the perpetrators of these are from our own faith.

Ladies and gentlemen, though there is much warmth and friendship here this evening, there is also much fear and hatred in the world outside. Yet we cannot be discouraged. There is enough commonality in the world religions to enable us to reach out to our fellow humans. This is especially important because our faith is dead if we do not reach out to other. Let us remind ourselves of the story of Abraham, who brought his sons together in reconciliation.

Most of us here, ladies and gentlemen, live and work in the United Kingdom.

I must, first of all, voice my gratitude to this country. Like many of you, I am grateful to this great country for the opportunities that we have received to fulfil our objectives and goals.

I was born into the Muslim faith and brought up with the guiding principles of Islam, which I find now are in serious conflict with the activities and utterances of some of the extremists in my religion. The challenge in the minds of many Muslims is to convey the true message of Islam, which is of peaceful and harmonious living with their neighbours.

The accepted teachings of Islam which have prevailed throughout the centuries are based on a belief in peace and compassion. It is appropriate to say that terrorists are evil, regardless of what religion they belong to. In today's world, each community and continent is faced with this problem in some shape or form. The terrorists are a tiny minority. The majority in the world, including Muslims, condemn them.

Human history is full of episodes involving every religion of misguided believers responsible for the slaughter of fellow humans on the alter of religion. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks states, and I quote:

"We are occasionally misled to believe that if faith is what makes us human, then those who do not share our faith are less than fully human. From that equation flowed the crusades, the inquisition, the jihads, the pogroms, the blood of human sacrifice through the ages. From this logic, when substituting race for faith, came the holocaust and the ethnic cleansing that we saw recently in Europe."

Ladies and gentlemen, humans have demonstrated their genius for creativity. However, in spite of all our glorious achievements, we have lost none of our ability to destroy and kill with impunity. In anticipation of this human frailty Islamic ethics forbids any attempt at extinguishing life, and I quote to you a verse from the Qur'an:

"...if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the lives of all mankind." (5:35)

There is equally, in many faiths, a clear instruction against taking your own life with the act of suicide. The Hindu Holy Book says:

"One should help oneself and not kill oneself."

and the Qur'an states:

"Do not kill yourself, as God has been to you most merciful." (4:29)

Therefore, strapping oneself with dynamite to kill innocent people in an act of suicide is totally un-Islamic and against the teaching of the Qur'an and all other world religions.

Ladies and gentlemen, religion and politics speak to different aspects of the human condition. Religion binds people together in communities and politics helps to mediate peacefully between their differences. The great tragedies of the 20th century came when politics was turned into a religion. The single greatest risk of the 21st century is that the opposite may occur, not when politics is religionised, but when religion is politicised.

What makes religion incapable of being politicised is what led Aristotle to criticise the Republic of Plato. Plato in the Republic sought to invest the State with characteristics of a religion. Aristotle replied by saying that, without difference, there can be no politics and without politics there can be no democracy. For democracy we need the space for diversity of views, pluralism and multiplicity to achieve meaningful global citizenship.

In today's world we live in a global economy of free trade and free movement of capital, which goes to the most profitable place. Thus countries compete to attract and retain capital in preference to other social objectives. This system is flawed in

that the global economy it creates is not matched by the development of society.

A very good insight into this complex problem is given by the writings of the well-known figure in the world of finance – George Soros, and I quote:

“As an anonymous participant in financial markets, I never had to weigh the social consequences of my actions. I was guided by only one consideration: to maximise my profits. When I sold sterling short in 1992 the Bank of England was on the other side of my transactions and I was taking money out of the pockets of British taxpayers. Bringing my social conscience into the decision-making process would not make any difference in the real world. Britain would have devalued anyway. In this sense, financial markets are not immoral; they are amoral.”

Globalisation, and its implications on the individual, is giving rise to a mixture of anger and incomprehension. There is an overriding fascination for those living in poor countries for Western affluence. In response the West erects barriers to

protect its borders. This leads to a frantic effort from those outside the barrier to get in for improving their lifestyles. Globalisation acting as a catalyst to the process creates a challenge to the identity of the migrant. Families are split apart as individuals leave home to look for employment, sometimes never to return. There is often a crisis for the individual in an unwelcoming and alien culture. For the migrant caught up in all this, religion becomes even more important as a source of identity. In this vulnerable state, if he is exposed to unscrupulous radical influences, the outcome can be harmful for both the individual and the State.

In the vision of the modern thinker, trade would do for a man what politics could not – i.e. tame passions, and change the outlook of man from aggression to consumerism and production, integrating nations for mutual benefits from trade and finance. All these notions, however, do not answer man's curiosity about himself. His sense of comfort, however, is well manifested in his loyalty for his tribe and community. Economics does not explain his quest for self-knowledge and identity. Religion answers this human dilemma. No other

system explains, as religion does, our reason for being on the planet.

However, in spite of religion, most societies at most times have been suspicious of and aggressive towards strangers who are non-kin and come from beyond the tribe. The embracing of the stranger is challenged by some for fear of diluting exclusive values and identities which some believe should be dominant in the national ethos. This promotes the negative values of exclusivity and hatred. It mobilises its supporters through emotive appeals of jobs, schools and home, etc, recalling ancient wrongs, bogus threats and caricatures of entire people.

Religion offers a different kind of solace. It speaks of the dignity of the person and the power of the human spirit.

And therefore can I, as a Muslim, recognise God's image in a stranger who is not a fellow Muslim? That is, can I see God's image in a Hindu, in a Sikh or in a Christian or a Jew? Islam tackles this confusion by saying to the Muslims in the Qur'an to respect all of God's creation regardless of their religion or method of worship, and I quote:

“O you men – we have created you male and female and I have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. So, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the best for conduct.”

Other faiths have similar advice when interfaced with some of the same problem of strangers.

The Hebrew part of the Bible commands – and I quote:

“When a stranger lives with you in your land do not ill-treat him. A stranger who lives with you should be treated like the native born. Love him as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

From the ancient Hindu scriptures Subhashith comes this advice:

“This man is ours, that man is a stranger. Discrimination of this kind is found only amongst mean-minded people. Those who are noble, to them the whole world is one family.”

Ladies and gentlemen, E. W. F. Tomlin, writing on Henry Bergson in "The Great Philosophers" mentions two kinds of human societies: one in which morality is imposed through pressure, and therefore a closed society; and the other in which it is imposed through attraction and is therefore an open society. The religion of this closed society is static, whereas the religion of the open society is dynamic – of which the finest flower is mysticism.

Mysticism has its roots in many faiths, but Sufism is Islam's tolerant mystical and universal philosophy. This philosophy is summed up in a prayer from the Naqshbandi Order associated with Bahauddin Naqshband, the Saint of Bukhara who lived in the fourteenth century. It could be the prayer of any religion anywhere in the world – and I quote:

"Oh my God, how gentle art thou with him who has transgressed against thee; how near art thou to him who seeks thee, how tender to him who petitions thee, how kindly to him who hopes in thee."

For me personally, the message of Sufism of compassion, humility and universal love, is attractive and inspiring. Their

message of Sulh-I-kul (peace with all) has endeared it to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It appeals to all sects and social classes.

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, one of the great Sufi and mystic poets, embraces in his teaching the whole human race without distinction of caste or creed. He looks at all faiths with the same love as his own faith. In his classic discourse on the form of worship translated by Jonathan Star, he says, and I quote:

“I looked upon every cross in every church, Yet he was not there. I went to the Temple of India

And the shrines of China, Yet he was not there.

I scaled the distant peak of Mount Qaf only to find

The empty nest of the Phoenix.

I visited the Kabe, but he was not at that sacred site

Amid pilgrims young and old.

I read the books of Avicenna But His wisdom went beyond all the words.

I went to the highest court,

Within the distance of “two bow lengths”

But he was not there.

Then I looked within y own heart and there I found Him –

He was nowhere else."

On a broader plane, humanism and universal love for all God's creatures is central to Sufi teachings and rightly in the age of globalisation, our world needs mutual understanding and tolerance.

A great teacher and leader of the Sikh religion, Guru Gobind Singh, taught the commonality of religions and the Oneness of God. He mentioned that the Ram of the Hindus and the Rahim of the Muslims were the same, and the various scriptures of the main religions of the world pointed to the Oneness of God.

We have here in the UK a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. Here, dialogue is the only way forward for addressing our differences. We ought to celebrate our commonality and discuss our differences based on mutual respect and trust for each other. It is imperative that we engage together in a continuing dialogue. Dialogue is no longer a luxury of a few well-meaning individuals; it has become a necessity demanding action without which only catastrophe stares us in the face.

In our midst, this evening, there are many, I am sure, who are concerned about the legacy we will leave behind for young people of today who will take the responsibility from our generation as the next set of guardians of a civilised world. My ongoing work with the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council has amply demonstrated to me that it is these young people for whom we need to leave a legacy of peace and brotherhood on which they can build a happier world of the future.

In order to achieve this, they need to know of the world religions and the common denominators in every religion of love, compassion, kindness and tolerance. We all have a duty to help create a safe world of progress and harmony. I believe that young people should be taught in schools and colleges the concept of the Universality of God from a study of comparative religions. We must shape the present to secure the future of the civilised world.

Ladies and gentlemen, apart from our own faiths, we should study and respect other philosophies, thoughts and religions. This is important because what hurts people the most is

disrespect shown to the things that they cherish, and the faith they follow.

We are more alike than different. It is foolhardy to hate a fellow human for worshipping God in a different way from us, and it is also highly unlikely to please The Almighty.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, let us proclaim loudly our intent to defeat those who are bent on destroying our civilised way of life. My friends, it is time to stand up and be counted. This indeed is our duty and we must fulfil it.