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***ISLAM, MUSLIMS AND HUMAN RIGHTS***

Dr Farhan Nizami;

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen;

I am grateful to Allah the Almighty for granting me this opportunity to be here today, and I thank the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies for the invitation to deliver this lecture. It is an immense honour for me to join the very distinguished group of luminaries who have preceded me in this prestigious lecture series. As a newly elected Trustee of the Centre, I was delighted to receive the welcome news that Her Majesty, The Queen, has granted a Royal Charter to the Centre, making it the first ever Muslim institution in Britain to have received such a Royal honour. My heartiest congratulations to the Centre, and to Dr Nizami and his team, for this well-deserved recognition.

2. I speak to you today not as a lawyer or theologian or specialist on human rights. Rather, as a political economist with an interest in development issues. This often leads me, as does my role as the Crown Prince of the State of Perak, to reflect on matters of human rights. This is the more so as constitutional monarchs in Malaysia, not unlike the case in Britain, have duties as leaders of religion.

3. The position of Islam and Muslims on the important subject of human rights has become a source of contention between the Muslim world and the West. As is often the case with such deeply rooted intercultural issues, the discourse is frequently afflicted with emotion, prejudice and misperception.

4. My purpose today is to share with you some thoughts on how we could work towards reconciling some of the differences between the two sides and the approaches they adopt towards advancing human dignity. The exercising of one's human rights, indeed, is the concretized manifestation of human dignity. As Kofi Annan once said, "*Human rights assert the dignity of each and every individual human being, and the inviolability of the individual's rights.*"<sup>1</sup> I shall begin, however, by placing the issues in historical context and highlighting some of the salient elements in the two approaches.

5. When history is viewed as a long process of the emancipation of human beings, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 stands as a seminal moment in the West. That Declaration then gave rise to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1966. Together they mark a solemn undertaking by the nations, peoples and cultures that make up our global community to secure progressively the recognition of, the respect for, and the observance of at least a minimum, common standard of human rights for us all.

6. This body of instruments known as the International Bill of Human Rights is not without its controversies. A number of states have not signed or ratified the conventions because they see difficulty in acceding to some of the provisions. Many, including even some countries in the West, have entered reservations on certain clauses. Alternative versions of rights have also surfaced since then, among them some from Muslim nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Address by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, to the Foreign Affairs Institute of the Paasiviki Association in Helsinki, Finland, 13 August 1997.

7. Yet, I think these differences do not detract from the fundamental significance of the International Bill of Rights. It provides the most widely recognized conception of human rights. Importantly as well, it has informed many national constitutions and inspired numerous significant initiatives to enhance the dignity and well-being of humankind, such as the United Nations agreement on the Millennium Development Goals.

8. The International Bill of Rights, however, is only a recent pivotal point in the great story of human emancipation. Concern with the dignity of human beings stretches much further back, and is evident in the early civilizations and ancient traditions of the East. It can be traced back as far as the Code of Hammurabi (circa 1780 BC). The Cyrus Cylinder, from the Persian civilization of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, has been interpreted by some, including the United Nations, as an ancient charter of human rights. The emperor Cyrus was described as the first ruler in history to have granted his subjects "freedom of opinion and other basic rights".<sup>2</sup> (A replica of the Cyrus Cylinder now stands displayed in one of the hallways of the United Nations Headquarters in New York City.)

9. The early religions of the world, including Judaism and Christianity, have also been among the earliest advocates of the ethic of humanity. With the advent of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when rulers nearly everywhere not least in Europe, the Near East and Arabia, had few responsibilities and obligations to the people, when women everywhere enjoyed virtually no rights, and when slavery and servitude were considered the natural order, Islam enjoined just rule, responsibility for the welfare of the poor and needy, the provision of education, and property rights for women. Setting slaves free was considered a meritorious religious act. In an age where war was barbarous and unarmed innocents were fair prey, Islam prescribed humane treatment for prisoners and safety and protection for civilians. Justice Christopher Weeramantry, in his study of Islamic jurisprudence, pointed out that Islamic international law had

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<sup>2</sup> Pahlavi, Mohammed Reza, *The White Revolution of Iran* (Tehran: Imperial Pahlavi Library, 1967), p. 9.

worked out clear principles in relation to the protection of civilians, non-combatants and prisoners of war, principles of the very kind that modern humanitarian law seeks to establish today.<sup>3</sup>

10. Similarly, the principles of democracy, constitutionalism and the rule of law had been present in the Islamic tradition hundreds of years before the Western versions of those principles were exported there. The Holy Qur'an repeatedly enjoins tolerance towards other cultures and religions. It opposes absolutism in politics, culture and religion. It abhors omnipotent despots. Although it is the duty of Muslims to obey their leaders, this duty is conditional upon their leaders accepting their own duties to follow the rule of law and to honour the trust placed upon them by their peoples and by God. Ideas of social contract were part of Islamic political philosophy long before the teachings of Locke and Rousseau. Political leaders are meant to govern through consultation (*shura*), a recommendation that adumbrates modern participative government. In Islamic criminal law, the accused is allowed prior hearing and the opportunity to defend himself or herself and is presumed innocent until proven guilty.<sup>4</sup>

11. By the standards and sensibilities of its time fourteen hundred years ago, we can see that the Islamic religion was a positive and progressive moral and legal force. One could even argue that the progress and change introduced by Islam was more radical than what is envisaged in the twentieth-century International Bill of Rights. Whereas the latter largely reflected the norms and values already prevailing in many Western countries, Islam had sought a fundamental change in the values, belief systems, customs and practices of Arab society and in the realities faced by people in the territories then brought under Muslim sway. Those changes raised the dignity of the human person and the human community to a level unknown before. Islam's

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<sup>3</sup> Weeramantry, C.G, *Islamic Jurisprudence: An International Perspective* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p.134-148.

<sup>4</sup> Faruqi, Shad Saleem, "Human Rights: Reflections of the East and Perceptions of the West," in A. Baharuddin and F.N.M. Noor (eds.), *Occidentalism and Orientalism: Reflections of the East and the Perceptions of the West* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2008), p. 64-65.

vision of human dignity was enshrined in the following Divine declaration: *“We have bestowed dignity (karama) on the children of Adam...and conferred upon them special favours above a great part of Our creation”* (Holy Qur’an 17:70).

12. For many centuries thereafter, until at least the eighteenth century in the United States and Europe, the values championed by Islam showed a maturity and humanity that stood in stark contrast to the feudalism and absolutism of medieval and early modern Europe, which might even be called a series of ‘dark ages’ from the enlightened standpoint of the best Islamic cases. In some respects, these values remain the benchmark to this day. Let us note the powerful lucidity of *sura 5:32* of the Holy Qur’an in its injunction to spare and save the lives of the innocent *“If anyone kills a person—unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind.”*

13. Thus for centuries Muslims have had their own system of values, rights and duties prescribed by their religion that at the same time granted corresponding (if not always equal) rights to the other party. But when the International Bill of Rights, which was inspired by Western experience, came into force, and compliance was expected from the Muslim community, they felt obliged to articulate a conception of human rights considered to be more directly in accordance with the Islamic tradition.

14. Hence, there emerged various new formulations from different quarters. Among the more notable of these are the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, issued by the Islamic Councils of London and Paris in 1981; the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, adopted by the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1990; and the Arab Charter on Human Rights, adopted by the Arab League in 2004.

15. These formulations have been received with varying degrees of approval as well as some controversy. Casting the Islamic concept of rights and duties in the guise of the rights familiar to those versed in secular human

rights discourse helped to contemporize the Muslim approach to improving human dignity and to contextualize it within the modern human rights framework. The international community and the human rights fraternity have become more knowledgeable about the Islamic approach, and with that will come greater awareness of the essential compatibility of the two distinct traditions. Nevertheless, the initiatives could not fully reconcile the two approaches: there are differences that still remain.

16. Notwithstanding the differences between the Islamic approach and the secular concept of human rights embodied in the International Bill of Rights, a hybrid arrangement that embraces both prevails today in many Muslim majority countries. The Islamic legal tradition is confined to matters such as religious rituals and personal and family law, while civil and political rights in democratic Muslim countries are approximately the same as those provided for in the International Bill of Rights. Thus in countries such as Indonesia, Turkey and Malaysia, legal and constitutional provisions relating to regular elections, personal freedoms and much of civil and criminal law are similar to those in the West.

17. In the case of my country, we are striving to make the imperatives of modernity and the aspirations of religion intermingle happily. Secularism and Islam largely co-exist in harmony, making Malaysia an example of a moderate, progressive and tolerant society. Historically the land of the Malays, then known as Malaya, when it gained independence in 1957, millions of applicants from its sizeable non-Malay communities (many of them locally born) were granted citizenship rights, which changed the entire political landscape of the country. The proportion of non-Malay, non-Muslim citizenry grew from 15 to 40 percent. This demonstration of accommodative spirit was truly remarkable, perhaps without precedent. The interests of all the ethnically and religiously diverse communities were safeguarded and entrenched in the constitution. All communities were granted equal rights to vote and to seek elective office. All were granted fundamental liberties such as the freedom of expression,

assembly and association, the right to profess and practice their religions freely, rights in respect of education, property, and employment, and the right to equal protection of the law.

18. Malaysia has had 12 general elections since independence, each of which was held within the electoral timetable as prescribed in the constitution. Transitions of power have been peaceful at both federal and state levels. The country has always been under civilian rule. In 1969, following the third general election that saw competing political parties stoking racial sensitivities to gain support, racial unrest erupted in the capital and began spreading to other parts of the country. A state of emergency was declared and Parliament was suspended. The National Operations Council (NOC) was established as the caretaker government, and despite having a membership made up of military and police personnel, was civilian-led. The NOC lasted for 21 months before a sense of normalcy and stability returned. Parliament was reinstated and, since then, has remained the repository of power and decision-making. There is a thriving civil society, which plays its part in shaping public policy.

19. Malaysia has also strived to maintain an independent judiciary. While there have been incidents in the past that have eroded the public's confidence in the justice system, efforts are being made in earnest to restore the honour and reputation that the Malaysian judiciary enjoyed for a long time.

20. The Islamic or Shari'a courts exist alongside civil courts with the former having jurisdiction only over Muslims and in personal and family matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody, probate, inheritance and division of property. Malaysia also has a full-fledged Islamic financial system that operates alongside the conventional financial system, with Muslims and non-Muslims having the freedom to choose between the two. Many non-Muslims in Malaysia, in fact, choose Islamic banking products because of the quality and security they provide.

21. When Malaysia established its own Human Rights Commission in 1999, the latter was mandated to give due regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, the advancement of human rights and human dignity in Malaysia is set to gain a significant new impetus in the coming months when Parliament is expected to reform a number of laws and enact others to ensure greater civil liberties while continuing to preserve public order and national security. The government has indicated that it intends to review and repeal three overlapping Emergency Laws, the Banishment Act of 1959 and the Internal Security Act of 1960 (popularly known as the ISA), which permits preventive detention without trial. In place of the Internal Security Act, there will be two new laws specifically designed to counter terrorism and maintain public security. In order to eliminate the possibility of abuse, powers of detention will be transferred from the executive to the judiciary. Also, detention periods will be shortened.

22. The Police Act of 1967 will be amended to remove some restrictions on public assembly, while the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984 will be amended to make annual renewal of permits for printing and publishing no longer necessary.

23. The cumulative effect of these legislative reforms will be to bring the laws on civil liberties and national security up-to-date, making them compatible with international norms and comparable to those of more mature democracies. They will replace laws that were attuned to the more challenging security environment many decades earlier. Moreover, these reforms will also make Malaysia's security laws more consistent with Islamic principles of justice and the rule of law. Having announced its intentions, it is my earnest hope that the Malaysian government will push ahead with these important reforms.

24. This embracing of elements from both the Islamic tradition and the Western system underlying the International Bill of Rights is made possible



because in fact they have much that is common. In matters of the rule of law, the expectation of a fair trial, the sanctity of life and the provision of a decent standard of living commensurate with human dignity, the two approaches are essentially the same in spirit as well as substance. It seems that we share the same formal ends, even if we arrive at them through different premises and methods.

25. In this regard it is necessary to remind ourselves that, as also in the case of the other faiths and their followers, one has to distinguish between the religion and the conduct of its adherents; hence the reference to both 'Islam' and 'Muslims' in the title of my lecture. This is not always easy, not least in the case of Islam and Muslims. The frequent bias and prejudice of the Western media does not help, I am afraid.

26. When Christian-majority countries in Africa and Latin America, or Buddhist-majority countries in East and Southeast Asia, are undemocratic, they are not usually identified with Christianity and Christians, or with Buddhism and Buddhists. But in the case of Muslim-majority countries that are similarly undemocratic, the association with Islam and Muslims is habitual.

27. On the other hand, when a Muslim-majority country is democratic, the link with religion is barely visible. For instance, when people think of Indonesia, a thriving democracy of more than 200 million people (the country with the largest Muslim population, and surprisingly to some, non-Arab), most of them do not instinctively associate it with Islam. More than 160 million Muslims live in democratic India. Many millions more lead a democratic way of life in other Muslim countries.

28. At this point, it would be useful to take note that there are also differences within the Islamic tradition as it is practised in the various Muslim-majority countries.

29. The Muslim *umma* is unified by the belief in the Oneness of God that is Allah; the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the Messenger of Allah; the Holy Qur'an as the divine source of reference; Makkah as the direction of prayer; and the core tenets of the faith called the *Aqidah*. This produces a powerful bond among all Muslims and provides them with a common identity. Apart from those attributes, however, the *umma* is a diverse community. The two major divisions, the Sunni and the Shi'a, are in turn divided into various schools of jurisprudence, the *madhhabs* which represent the authoritative traditions for interpreting the *Shari'a*. Each school offers a different interpretation of the *Shari'a* that can also vary from country to country or even from state to state within the same country.

30. The interpretation of the religious law that is in force in a given Muslim country has been shaped by many factors. These include the different Islamic legal schools to which the various regions were first exposed, and their subsequent religious and political history and system of government, local culture, customs and traditions. All of these have had a bearing.

31. The territories that today constitute Malaysia and Indonesia for example, were exposed predominantly to Sunni Islam and, specifically, the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. The peaceful nature of Sufism that the early Muslim preachers and traders brought with them from southern Arabia contributed to the moderate and tolerant brand of Islam that prevails in the two countries today. This contrasts with the more austere influences from history and culture that prevailed in various other parts of the Islamic world. The religious diversity of Malaysia and Indonesia has also encouraged greater tolerance and accommodation among people of different faiths.

32. Yet, while giving due regard to the variation among Islamic schools and Muslim countries, one cannot deny the important overall differences between the Islamic and secular approaches to upholding human dignity and of safeguarding fundamental rights. For Muslims, religious law is sacred and

ought to be complied with as a matter of conscience. The human rights instruments, on the other hand, are human constructs. Secular rights stress the individual directly and the civic community, for the most part, indirectly. The Islamic tradition tends to stress the need to create a sense of responsibility and community among individuals. While the dominant Western liberal philosophy tends to emphasise rights, Islam puts a premium on duties. Islam's path to human dignity is through emphasizing responsibilities and obligations and rights of believers as God's vicegerents, stewards and representatives on Earth. Secular human rights, in contrast, tend to emphasize the rights of individuals against the arbitrary power of the state and other actors. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, duties and responsibilities to the community are only mentioned briefly and in a general way.

33. The latter was a point of weakness that has been addressed to some extent in the subsequent covenant on economic, social and cultural rights. The largely individualist approach of Western jurisprudence and the more communitarian approach of Islam are manifested in the pro-rights and pro-justice orientations of the two traditions respectively. The Holy Qur'an accentuates justice, which aims, theoretically at least, at a balanced implementation of rights and obligations.

34. There is nothing in the quest for human rights that requires the exclusion of duty or of responsibility – whether to family, community, country, or the larger cosmos. Every right is, in a sense, a responsibility as well, and the pursuit of individual rights can be taken too far. For example, it would be callous and irresponsible for an artist or filmmaker to defend an offensive artistic creation based on his individual rights, if the action subverts harmonious relations between communities. In Islam, there is a clear emphasis on moral limits and boundaries. Indeed, most moral philosophies, especially Eastern ones, stress the need for balance, moderation and even boundaries. When boundaries are transgressed, the social fabric can be undermined.

35. This reminds me of an anecdote about Mahatma Gandhi. Back in 1947, Julian Huxley, then the Director of UNESCO, asked Gandhi to contribute his thoughts to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In his reply, Gandhi wrote, *"I learned from my illiterate but wise mother that all rights to be deserved and preserved come from duty well done"*<sup>5</sup>.

36. As I noted earlier, women secured advances in their rights, showing the progressive spirit of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The instruments on human rights in Islam that I just mentioned also declare the equality of men and women in a number of areas. But they are not as unequivocal as the United Nations instruments.

37. Although in many parts of the Muslim world women may be perceived to be disadvantaged by present secular standards, in areas such as inheritance and in matters of marriage and divorce, nevertheless the proper contextualization of the Islamic laws governing these areas would serve to situate them in a more equitable light.

38. On another sticky issue, freedom in the choice of religion is regarded by non-Muslims to be problematic in Muslim religious law. Whereas compulsion in religion is expressly forbidden, many Muslim jurists hold that the punishment for renouncing Islam should be prohibitive. It should be noted though that not all are of this view. A number of Muslim jurists believe that apostasy is a sin to be judged in the next life, not a crime to be punished by the state in this life.

39. On the other hand, secular economic, cultural and social rights sometimes fall short of the standards set by the Muslim religious tradition for social welfare and care for the poor and needy, even if conditions in many of the welfare states of the West have become very good.

40. I turn now to the delicate or, indeed, tricky subject of reconciling the Islamic and secular approaches to securing human dignity. I would like to

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<sup>5</sup> UNESCO, *Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations*; (London: Alan Wingate, 1949).

suggest that reconciliation need not mean conformity to a single, universal rule or system. Such reconciliation will prove difficult to achieve, and may not be a practical option for the near future. Muslims are bound by their religion to consciously comply with their sacred law as interpreted by their respective religious authorities. Forcing upon them provisions from the International Bill of Rights that may not be compatible with their religious law poses problems and can lead to tension and conflict.

41. The Muslim-majority countries are, therefore, in a quandary. As members of the United Nations they are bound by the UN Charter and its instruments. Some of them signed and ratified the international covenants and other conventions relating to human rights, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Yet they face difficulties in implementing some of the provisions in the areas where Islamic law takes precedence, despite amendments and reservations to them suggested by countries like Turkey, Malaysia and Pakistan.

42. The recourse of Muslim-majority countries to their own instruments such as the Cairo Declaration has also met with limited success. There have been criticisms of perceived shortcomings, and compliance has not been rigorous. In many cases, national law and Islamic law continue to prevail despite inconsistencies with the provisions of the UN human rights instruments. Countries applying Islamic law in these circumstances continue to be the target of external censure and pressure.

43. It may be noted in passing that Muslim-majority countries are not the only ones facing problems in acceptance and compliance. Many countries that have signed and ratified the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including the United States for instance, have entered reservations, understandings or declarations.

44. Malaysia too is among a score of countries that has neither signed nor ratified this Covenant, though not for reasons related to the Muslim tradition. We are in good company, though. We have Vatican City, the Holy See, with us.

45. Reconciliation through full subscription to a single and common instrument will therefore be difficult, except in a formal sense—for example, through being parties to the International Bill of Rights. But what is possible is continuing to make incremental changes to the human rights instruments, laws and practices at both the international and national levels—changes that will result in greater consistency, and perhaps even some synergy, between the secular and religious versions of rights. In that process all parties would strive to improve their standards regarding human rights and human dignity and most especially their implementation of such rights. Then, I believe, the gap between secular and religious rights would narrow.

46. There will be fewer problems in this regard with the International Bill of Rights, because the human rights provisions contained therein have been periodically elaborated and improved upon. For example, the elimination of racial discrimination and of discrimination against women, protection of the rights of the child and those of migrant workers, and protection against torture have become the subject of additional instruments and protocols. It is worth noting, too, that laws and regulations drawn from secular authorities and secular sources are easier to review and amend, unlike the stability and certainty afforded by the sacred traditions.

47. The Muslim world as a whole has a major task in better understanding the implications of its provisions under their religious law for human dignity and human rights. These are drawn rightly from the Holy Qur'an; the Sunna, which is the example, set by the Prophet; *Ijma*, which is the consensus of Muslim religious scholars, the *ulema*; and *Qiyas*, which is the use of legal reasoning. When we talk about using these principal sources of Islam, we must not forget

that there was and is a very large civilizational component in the Islamic world provided by the Muslim scholastic and philosophical and scientific traditions. Of course, when it comes to matters of Islamic law specifically, the interpretative tradition is represented by the Islamic schools of jurisprudence, as I have said. In this tradition, where the law or injunction is drawn directly from an unambiguous text of the Qur'an, it cannot be changed except, up to a point, through legitimate interpretation. Where it is drawn from the other sources, more flexibility is possible.

48. This divine and religious origin of human rights and human dignity in Islam makes review and change more problematic than in the secular approach. The difficulties are further compounded by the sometimes differing interpretations given by the various legal schools and the different religious authorities. Islamic law unfolded gradually over the centuries, determining values for every circumstance. It should be understood, therefore, that the strong resistance to change is common to most traditional societies, and advocating change without apparent necessity often proves to be a risky business.

49. Nevertheless, some within the Muslim community take the view that the application of some aspects of Muslim religious law does require re-examination (and traditional Muslim jurisprudence after all makes provision for this) – notwithstanding the changes that have already taken place in various parts and jurisdictions of the Muslim world.

50. There are Muslim schools of thought and individual scholars and activists who believe that there is much room for exploration of some key areas, such as equality of men and women, freedom of expression, and mode of punishment and severity of sentence. Some think a reinterpretation of the relevant laws is possible and necessary. Others think the substantive laws of Islam are already clear, and therefore the problem merely resides in its just procedural implementation. Yet others think it is both.

51. Various Muslim thinkers on this subject have pointed out differing routes and methods for analyzing what they see as the root problem. One method is through education regarding the spirit and message of Islam, which would result in redressing injustices caused by ingrained customs. Another method is through the application of the universal principle of reciprocity in the exercise of Islamic law, whereby the treatment and rights that one group or community expects for itself should also be accorded to other groups and communities.

52. Another idea is that the vast Islamic legal tradition already provides for the humane and just functioning of state and society and guarantees all the human freedoms and responsibilities necessary to secure human dignity. The abuse and selective use of Islamic law to suit vested interests and vested power, however, have caused the injustices and ills that afflict some Muslim societies. This situation can be remedied by the sincere administration of good governance based on the application of soundly understood Islamic values and principles.

53. In doing so, one can recognise the functional distinction between Shari'a and *fiqh*, where the former is sacred, eternal and universal, and the latter serves to project this reality through differing human endeavour, contextually applied. There is also the distinction between *'ibada* and *mu'amala*. The former deals with the relation between God and the individual. The latter serves as a direct extension into the realm of human action and social regulation and is directed primarily by juristic reasoning.

54. The correct understanding of a Qur'anic injunction is often not a naively literal one, nor can it be done simply to achieve some desired expedient end, but rather it has to be in line with the continuity and integrity of the interpretative tradition. No Muslim law or rule, therefore, can be read in isolation, but instead must be seen holistically, taking account of all other treasured sources, principles and rules.



55. Social and historical circumstances are not to be ignored, but must be dealt with in the light of those principles and rules. One must always go behind the text to the context. It is often forgotten, for example, that the *suras* in the Holy Qur'an are not chronologically arranged. Glimpsing their eternal message requires an understanding of the time, place and context surrounding their revelation.

56. Islam is a mansion with many rooms. Diversity of position amongst Muslim scholars is an undeniable fact. We need to improve contacts within the Umma in order to see our diversity as an aspect of our intellectual richness we have inherited. The obsession with one-dimensional interpretations must be abjured. We must instead make our bouquet of knowledge with flowers from the many Islamic gardens. Muslim scholars from East and West, North and South, and from all of our different traditions must come together to tackle our common difficulties.

57. This is just a very brief and incomplete overview of the extensive discourse involving the various Islamic schools of thought and individual scholars on the issues confronting Muslims and on the avenues open to them in their quest to achieve greater human dignity. If I have tended to focus more on the deficits and problems of the Muslim community, it is not only because my theme compelled me to do so. It is also because as a Muslim I feel deeply about the dignity and wellbeing of the people of my faith and about their place in the world.

58. So far, I have invited the Umma to seek deeper understandings of their tradition and basic laws so as to promote human rights, social justice and democracy. I would now also like to briefly draw attention to the gap that those in the Western world can fill in order to promote peace and prosperity in the Muslim world and foster greater understanding between Islam and the West.

59. At the interfaith level, there could be greater recognition in the West of the many similarities between Islam, Judaism and Christianity; of the

veneration and respect that Islam accords to Christian and Jewish prophets; of the regard for the *Ahli Kitab* or People of the Book that Muslims are instructed to confer on Christians and Jews. Instead, the distance between Islam and Christianity is often exaggerated. On a host of issues, whether they be human rights, social justice, environmental responsibility, good governance, freedom of religion, or law and morality, there is much in common between these two religions. The distance is only greater between Islam together with the other great spiritual traditions and the hedonistic and crassly materialistic version of the secular view of the world and of human nature.

60. At the intellectual level, the Western citadels of learning, such as the University of Oxford, can draw greater attention to Islamic contribution to human knowledge and understanding and to Islam's civilisational achievements. In this regard, the intellectual richness provided by the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies commands my great admiration, and is something that many more institutions might well emulate.

61. At the political level, the West cannot turn a blind eye to how some Western governments have supported dictatorships in Muslim lands. Until the recent Arab Spring, some Western governments acted in ways that thwarted the flowering of democratic movements in Muslim nations. Some have even conspired to subvert and overthrow democratically elected governments in some Muslim countries. Though Muslims are often largely to blame for the failure of democracy to emerge in their own countries, the role of some countries in the West in obstructing the growth of representative institutions in Muslim societies cannot be disregarded.

62. At the psychological level, the West could seek to empathize with Muslim anguish at the suffering of fellow Muslims in many parts of the world, not least in Palestine, with the failure of the United Nations and the world community, thus far, to resolve the Palestinian conflict at the level of international law.

63. At the mass media level, in Western commentary on Islam, it should be recognised that there are as many faces of Islam as there are of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and other religions. To evaluate Islam by reference to its worst-run societies is unhelpful. Additionally, in comparing civilizations, one cannot compare the lofty ideas of one region with the ground realities of another. Theory must be compared with theory, reality with reality. Meaningful comparisons cannot be made on the basis of the lowest common denominator.

Dr. Nizami, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

64. It is my firm belief that the debates now surrounding Islam, Muslims and human rights, both within the Muslim community and with others outside, should be moderate in tone and conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect and with a good understanding of the challenges confronting all sides. Only a discourse of this nature can yield the desired positive results in advancing human rights, democracy and good governance throughout the world, including in many Muslim lands blighted by war, dictatorship and poverty.

65. Human dignity is the cherished desire of peoples of all creeds and cultures. Hunger and want, discrimination and deprivation, war and violence, and oppression and occupation are blind to borders and nationalities and to race and religion. Human rights abuses, undemocratic regimes and socio-economic ills occur in all parts of the world. Even the most affluent and democratic countries are not without problems, and violations of international law and of the rights of other peoples still plague the planet.

66. The quest for human dignity began a long time ago. The challenge is global. The journey continues.

Thank you.