

## RECOGNISED VALUES AND RELIGIOUS POLICIES

Inaugural address by His Excellency Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Salmi -  
Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs – Sultanate of Oman

Your Excellencies...

When it was first suggested that we should have a meeting with you in the Sultanate, we thought this was a brilliant idea for several reasons:

Firstly, because of the great respect in which your esteemed Council is held around the world, which makes it a suitable channel for a new relationship to be established between Latin America and the Arab world, the Gulf and Oman. While we were aware that contacts were ongoing at several levels between our two regions through the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, this meeting offers an opportunity to identify prospects for additional contacts and closer mutual understanding. In this connection, we are waiting for you to let us know what you think the possibilities are.

Secondly, because of the ground-breaking role played by the Sultanate of Oman during His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said's reign in promoting the values of intercommunication, mutual understanding and peace in the region and the wider world. Hence our meeting presents an opportunity to spread the message of Oman and its Renaissance within a new context. You yourselves, of course, will have meetings and discussions with Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and senior members of the administration, who will explain Oman's foreign policy and diplomacy and the thinking behind it.

Thirdly, because of the troubling situation in our region, one of the consequences of which is that Islam has become a global problem. This is why, I should like to give you our point of view on what has happened, and is happening, to Islam and what can be done to help determine the course of events. I also intend to take a look at Muslim religious politics over recent decades and consider whether it is possible to predict how things are likely to turn out in the future.

1

In 1997 the Human Rights Council in Geneva invited representatives of the major religions for consultations on giving their support to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other agreements and conventions, as well as on ways of gaining their followers' trust and co-operation in promoting ideas and practices conducive to the acceptance of basic human rights in their societies and religious lives. While the representatives of the Christian churches were happy to explain their approach to

achieving this laudable objective – particularly in Christian communities outside Europe and North America – the representatives of the Islamic, Buddhist and

Hindu faiths saw two areas as being the focus of their concerns: firstly, the contributions their scriptures and religious traditions could make to Universal Human Rights, and secondly, the objections they might have to the present system, including the principle of the natural, inalienable rights of mankind and the double standards they observed in their implementation?

That period – that is to say, between 1995 and 2001 – marked Stage Three of the World Christian-Muslim Dialogue. During Stage One the main Western Evangelical churches invited Muslims – particularly in the Middle East – to set up a “Union of Believers” as a counterweight to Communism, and in the 1950s several conferences and seminars were held in Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan for that purpose. Of course, just as those churches allowed themselves to be guided by the political leaderships that were engaged in the Cold War (1950-1990), so too was the region’s Islamic religious establishment influenced by the prevailing political systems, as well as (in fact, even more) by public opinion following the occupation of Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel. However, while the churches shared a common stance and discourse, that was not the case with the Islamic religious establishment. This was due not only to the different attitudes of the Arab political regimes to the Cold War, but also because Muslims did not have centralised religious administrations.

Consequently, the attitude of most of their religious institutions was “Yes, but...” (That is to say, “Yes to the discovery that we are believers like you; but while we are believers, our priorities are different from yours where the dangers are concerned. We do not see the danger to us as coming from the Soviet Union or Communist ideology, but from the occupation of Palestine and the Western Bloc’s – and indeed the Eastern Bloc’s - support for that occupation.”)

Anyway, those conferences and seminars were ineffective from a religious point of view, since they did not bring Christians and Muslims closer together. Nor did they have any political or strategic impact. As we all know, during the Cold War the Arab and Islamic regimes in the East were divided into two camps – Soviet and American. However, while most of the regimes produced by military coups allied themselves with the Soviet Union, this did not, as Western religious circles and strategists had feared, lead to the spread of Communism in the Arab world.

Stage Two of the dialogue (or the attempt to establish more cordial and co-operative relations between Muslims and Christians) was more positive and effective. The Catholic Church set the ball rolling with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which called for friendly relations with Jews and Muslims based on the unity of the Abrahamic faiths. This appeal clearly represented a major concession to the Muslims in that it classed their religion as an Abrahamic faith like Judaism, which traces its lineage back to Abraham,

and Christianity, which regards itself as the spiritual descendant of Abraham. Abraham (PBUH) is a pivotal personality in the Qur'an because he called upon people to worship the One God and built the Ka'aba with his son Ishmael. The Old Testament mentions Ishmael as Abraham's son from his bondmaid Hagar; however, it assigns everything (in religion and worldly goods) to Isaac, the son of Abraham from the freewoman Sarah.

Throughout the controversy that raged for over a thousand years between Muslim and Christian theologians, Islam was not recognised as a possible third branch of the Abrahamic tree. Therefore the Muslims were delighted with the Second Vatican Council's recognition and began to attend seminars and workshops on ways of implementing its resolutions on a Christian-Muslim faith partnership. This was despite the fact that there are not many Catholics in the Arab East, where most Christians are Orthodox or Copts.

So the Vatican's appeal helped promote friendlier relations between Christians and Muslims in the Arab world, though these were later damaged by the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), which left deep scars.

While the most positive aspect of the Vatican's call for an Abrahamic partnership was its abandonment of its historic confrontation in favour of dialogue, this presented the Muslims with a challenge. First they would need to prepare themselves for their role as partners; then they too would have to come up with a similar initiative or take the process a stage further, while ridding themselves of the animosities of the past.

The Abrahamic faiths, which believe in the One God, are "restrictive" religions in that, unlike other faiths such as the Asian religions, they only recognise one truth. Moreover, within their own confines Judaism does not recognise Christianity and neither of them recognises Islam, while historically Muslims reject both of them as well. Even so, Muslims have a possible line of approach open to them which they have never taken the trouble to exploit or follow up: The Qur'an classes Jews and Christians as "*Ahl al Kitab*" ("People of the Book") and calls upon them to join a partnership on the basis of "*al kalimah al sawa*" ("common terms"). However, Islamic theology has struggled at length to agree on the conditions of such a partnership, which has always appeared very difficult to achieve in a climate of mutual rejection and recrimination.

In an unprecedented move the Christian Catholics invited the Muslims to an unconditional dialogue. Some religious groups accepted the invitation, while others reverted to the traditional practice of laying down conditions for an Abrahamic partnership. At the same time, a third – bolder – party responded that the Holy Qur'an called for dialogue as an alternative to the old theological tradition of criticising and attacking other faiths.

It has been political and strategic factors rather than religious objections that have obstructed these promising new trends. While Palestine continues to haunt us with its wars and settlement policies, Christian religious establishments have been hesitant to adopt a definite position on Israel as a Jewish state. Other factors have included the

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1978-79), as well as the US campaign to overcome the Soviet Bloc and Pope John Paul II's alliance with the Americans in the name of faith and freedom. It is worth noting here that in the 1950s the Protestant churches tried to persuade the Muslims to respond to their call for faith and freedom, though the Muslims rejected it because they did not regard Communism as a threat that would justify a religious war. However, when the campaign against Communism was seen against the background of the invasion of an Islamic country – Afghanistan – several political and religious groups saw such a war as being in their interests, particularly since it was destined to lead to an alliance with the United States in the wake of the latter's victory in the Cold War.

The “Afghan *jihad*” was a powder-keg which continued to roll until it set off a religious explosion that helped destroy much of the Arab and Islamic world after al Qa'edah's attack on the United States in 2001.

In the 1980s it seemed that three major creeds – Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam – had come together to play an active role on America's side in its war against the Communist world. However, the Americans were the only winners in that war, which heralded the beginning of a new era of hegemony and globalisation, and the new strategic situation left its mark on the three religions. Among the Protestants the New Evangelists began to overtake the major established churches, in the Catholic Church Pope John Paul II turned his attention to fighting the new globalisation policies, while Islam – as we pointed out earlier – underwent an explosion at the hands of its religious leaders, communities and institutions, particularly after the Second Gulf War when Iraq occupied Kuwait and the United States built a broad-based international alliance to attack Iraq. The United States did a replay of this with its closest ally in Afghanistan in 2001-2002 and Iraq in 2003.

In the turbulent days of the 1990s, and at a time when the world was becoming increasingly afraid of the rising fundamentalism at the heart of Islam, the liberal Catholic thinker Hans Kung initiated his project of a global ethic. Speaking at the Chicago Conference on Religions in 1991, Kung asserted that world peace could not be achieved unless there was peace between the religions. However, peace between religions would only be possible if there was a “coming together” of their major ethical systems. In Kung's view his project was a further step along the path mapped out by the Vatican Council, though it differed from it in that it had been broadened to include all religions, not just the Abrahamic ones.

While the project was welcomed by followers of the Asian religions, the New Evangelists and conservative Catholics found little in it to ignite their enthusiasm. In the Islamic world there were mixed reactions. The neo-fundamentalists saw it as an attempt to eliminate Islam by erasing all its definitive identifying features, while other Islamic institutions felt that their acceptance of the new pan-Abrahamic approach had brought few benefits to Muslims; accordingly, this new, expanded version needed to be scrutinised with great caution.

We in Oman believe that this initiative represents a promising “third stage” and contains elements that could be beneficial. Muslims do not have long memories of bitter conflicts with the Asian religions and expanding our horizons in this way would offer the opportunity to counter the rising fundamentalism that is taking place in Islam - a fundamentalism that turns religion into a series of rituals, ignores the true values and ethics of the Faith. The worst thing about these conflicts is that they lead to a rejection of every element held in common with other faiths and the rest of the world.

Since this is how we view the situation, we have invited Professor Kung to lecture in Oman on more than one occasion. Over the past two decades we have also invited other proponents of the pan-Abrahamic approach, as well as intellectuals and specialists in Islam who are interested in the philosophy of religion and religious politics. Over the same period I myself have taken part in discussions and lectured at numerous seminars, Catholic and Evangelical events and universities in Europe and the United States. On every occasion I was asked pointedly for my opinion about the extremism that is currently a feature of our religion, as well as the dangers it poses, how it has been affected by regional and international politics and strategies, and how to encourage other trends in Islam and in relations between Muslims and other faiths.

Our magazine *Al Tasamoh* (“Tolerance”)/*Al Tafahom* (Mutual Understanding) – published in Arabic and English by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs – plays a major role in promoting our programme of openness and establishing partnerships. Its approach is fourfold and comprises: a new understanding of the Qur’anic values of equality, mercy, justice, *ta’arof* (“knowing one another”) and the public good; a comparative study of religious issues in the modern world; past and present relations between the different Islamic groups and schools and the impact of the modern world and international politics on religion; and how to combat fundamentalism. Contributors to the magazine include Western specialists in the philosophy of religion and religious politics - a reflection of the fact that we see our role at the conferences we organise or attend as being to enlighten and bring about change in the world’s view of our culture and civilization, while establishing new common ground with other religions and cultures. The same principle also applies to the lectures given by our guest speakers and the annual *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) Symposium.

2

Gentlemen...

Over the past few years (here I am also including the present day) our religion and our society have embarked upon what I regard as Stage Four of our relationship with other religions, cultures and the rest of the world, and it would now be an appropriate time to pause for a while and look back at our efforts over the past two decades. In putting our programme into practice, we at the Sultanate of Oman’s Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs were aware of what we were doing, so we were not operating in a vacuum. However we look at it – whether from the religious or ethnic angle – it must be

recognised that the “Omani experience” has been a pluralistic one, and the country’s Renaissance during His Majesty the Sultan’s reign has added several promising new dimensions to it. Of course, your own experiences in Latin America have been quite different from ours, particularly those that relate to the role and status of religion in society and the relationship between religion and the state and political system.

As you are aware, our Arab societies and countries have experienced two new upheavals: one produced by the movements for change and the other resulting from the rise of what has become known as political Islam and *jihadism*. However, thanks to its policy of pluralism, coexistence – or what we call *al ‘aish al mushtarak* or living together – and sound development, Oman has been able to cope with the movements and upheavals that have set several neighbouring states ablaze. So despite the uncertainties of Stage Four – in the sense that it is impossible to predict anything with certainty – the Omani political model (where both religion and the state are concerned) promises great potential for stability and success. God willing

I have been talking here about religious politics and policies and this is precisely the subject I intend to return to now. In promoting reform and enlightened views we have encountered a number of problems because of certain ingrained religious attitudes in our Arab society. Political Islam and *jihadism* are among the more obvious manifestations. We all recognise that the causes of the extremism which some of us suffer from can be traced to the religious policies adopted by Arab countries, while some of the other causes may be attributed to regional relations and international politics.

A short while back I referred to the war – or wars – in Afghanistan, which are a product of international politics and are largely to blame for the violence which continues to threaten our region. Islam has been present in this part of the world for over one thousand four hundred years and our peoples are profoundly religious. One indication of this is the Hajj Pilgrimage which ended a little over a month ago and attracted over three million pilgrims.

We have not witnessed religious explosions on the present scale since we were subjected to earth-shattering onslaughts like the Crusades, the Mongol invasion and – in more recent times - the imperialist wars. In our view their cause does not lie in the religion itself, though – as I have pointed out – “religious politics” became seriously distorted during the 20<sup>th</sup> century – not only because of foreign interference but also for reasons much closer to home. Moreover, when we consider the enormous instability and upsets you yourselves suffered during the 20<sup>th</sup> century from various brands of Marxism and capitalism, it is hardly surprising that deliberate tampering and meddling in the field of religious politics - from within the region and outside it – should have had serious consequences in this part of the world.

Now let us return to our own involvement in the question of religious values and religious politics. I have already mentioned our creative response to calls for openness, partnership and shared values, and I also pointed out that we had to tackle the problems of intolerance and extremism, which were due to various factors. However - and we need to

face this fact - we have also encountered major difficulties from our partners who belong to other religions and cultures. Like the rest of mankind, Arabs and Muslims crave recognition of their humanity, religion and national character. (You in Latin America have suffered like us - or perhaps more - from a failure to give your human and national identity its due.) Meanwhile, we for our part have embraced the message of the common Abrahamic faith and mutual recognition (and its implications) with open arms. We have accepted the call for a common global ethic, and before that we and other states and societies were already signatories to the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, over the past three decades we have seen a great reluctance to recognise these shared values on the part of the religious and cultural groups we have engaged with (and who have ostensibly engaged with us). In the wake of such notions as “The End of History” and “The Clash of Civilizations” we have been told by valued friends that concepts like justice, peace, tolerance and recognition are not in fact shared values because we and they understand them in different ways. Some of them maintain that this is due to differences in the essential nature of our religions or our social structures and attitudes, so that the root of our problems with them is religious and cultural. Moreover, they say, we Arabs and Muslims are exceptions to the general values of the modern world. From our side we have told them that no reluctance or rejection can be laid at the feet of our religion. The Holy Qur’an says: “Mankind was one single nation”, and “O mankind, We have created you male and female and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another.” In other words, both we and you share the same concepts since we are human beings and, as Muslims, we are ready and able to welcome mutual recognition. So come. Let us work together for the sake of what we have all recognised and accepted, inspired by what is known as *fitrah* (innate, instinctive belief) and shared experience. There are two terms that occur repeatedly in the Qur’an – *al ma’ruf* (what is recognised and accepted as good), and *al munkar* (what human beings recognise and accept as to be avoided and resisted). Let us also consider these three qualities: reason, justice and morality. Man is both a rational creature and a moral creature, and reason and morality must necessarily presuppose justice and equity.

### 3

With the rise of fundamentalism and the doubts that many people have about common values and ethics, does this mean that policies of openness, “knowing one another” and partnership initiatives have failed or are unfeasible?

It is my belief that the ideas and policies designed to promote openness, mutual understanding and recognition have not failed and that it is not possible for either side – us or any others – to backtrack on them. We are a part of this world and we have no desire either to intimidate it or to fear it. What we want is to play an effective part in it. For centuries we Omanis lived and worked alongside other peoples in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. We established cultures, civilizations and states among those peoples. Like other peoples on the coasts of the Ocean and in the hinterland we too suffered from imperialism. Furthermore, the lives of nations cannot be measured in years, or even in centuries.

And just as Oman's own experience has been a success by any standards, so too has the Arab and Islamic experience proved its success on the scales of history, and it will prove to be successful in the future too. We need to work hard in the field of politics in general, but particularly in religious politics. In our case, the harmonious relationship between religion and the state has a long history, and in this respect we differ from the Europeans. However, while the long struggle for separation between religion and the state in the West over the past three centuries ultimately had an outcome that was satisfactory for both sides, for us the past six decades have witnessed a politico-religious conflict between two opposing poles, driven by the factors we mentioned earlier – some domestic and others from outside the region. We need to benefit from our own experiences and the experiences of other nations so that we can restore harmony between the two sides.

We are in urgent need of religious reform. This will entail tackling the distortion of concepts which religious parties and factions have been engaged in over the past six or seven decades. You in Latin America have suffered from the excessive power of the Catholic religious institutions, as well as the methods and encroachments of the Neo-Evangelists, while on our side the problem we face is the weakness of our religious institutions – a weakness that is partly to blame for the rise in fundamentalism. It is because of this weakness that various religious factions have been able to claim that they have the right to fill the role of the religious establishment and that it is their duty to take over the public space in the name of religion. In Scott Heppard's book on religious politics, published in 2007, I read that under some democratic political systems - in countries such as the United States and India - religion has been exploited as a means of gaining popularity and this has led to a rise in fundamentalism.

I believe that fundamentalism can be effectively tackled by strong religious institutions that stick to their proper and recognised functions. They should be able to prevent religion from being used in order to stir up hatred and fanaticism as a means of winning quick popularity.

Religious reform – like political reform – is a complicated process which requires a social contract that can be adjusted as circumstances demand. One of the parties to the process and these adjustments would be the “Deep State”, as it is called; this is a familiar feature of several Arab countries.

Gentlemen...

You are our honoured guests and you have extensive experience and expertise. You have come to us at a time when our Arab region is in an extraordinary situation. If I were to digress and merely talk generalities you would think that I was trying to hide something from you in order to avoid embarrassment; accordingly, I decided to touch on some aspects of religious politics in Oman and the Arab world in order to help provide a clearer picture and ensure that our relationship is one of candour, trust and goodwill. My view is that the Arab region has got many problems, including a religious one. However, by

taking an enlightened, responsible approach we can – and must – also see these problems as opportunities. You know, of course, that it is not mere rhetoric to say that the world of today is fraught with danger and full of opportunities. This is a truth that applies to us Arabs in particular. The roots of our history extend back deep into the past and we occupy a strategic position between three continents. Moreover, by today's standards our land has considerable resources. Our forefathers fought to free us from imperialism and hegemony just as the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America struggled. We had no major problems with our neighbours or the states of the Indian Ocean.

At the same time we – like you – have had to deal with the problems of state-building and development and, while the age of imperialism belongs to the past, in our land Palestine is still occupied.

This, as I said earlier, is the challenge we have to face in our efforts to restore tranquillity and confidence to the young rebellious religious hard-liners who are threatening our stability and terrorising the world.

Today we are delighted to meet you. In modern times you have come to know the Arabs as immigrants, job-seekers and public and private sector employees, while from our side we are encouraging closer contacts for the sake of co-operation and partnership in the interests of the globally recognised values of justice, peace, freedom and friendship.

Thank you for your patience in listening to me. I should now like to conclude with some verses from the Holy Qur'an that describe the Qur'anic approach to relations between members of the human race: "And who speaks fairer than he who calls unto Allah and works righteousness and says: 'Surely I am of those who surrender [in Islam]'? Not equal are the good deed and the evil deed. Repel with that which is fairer and behold, he between whom and thee there is enmity shall be as if he were a loyal friend. Yet none shall receive it except the steadfast; none shall receive it except the one who is highly fortunate."

Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Salmi - Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs – Sultanate of OMAN