



2018 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE BUDAPEST

June 24 – 27, 2018

*Towards Reconciliation in a Broken World:
Jewish and Christian Contributions to Responsible
Citizenship*

*A megbékélés útja a törékeny világban:
zsidó és keresztény együttműködés a felelős polgárság
érdekében*

Plenary Session

MONDAY, JUNE 25, 2018 (DANUBIUS HOTEL FLAMENCO - AUDITORIUM)

How can I find God in the “Other”? Towards Responsible Religious Belonging

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Introduction

I am indeed honored, as a Muslim, to stand before this esteemed audience of religious leaders and scholars in this historic city (Budapest). Allow me to begin with a couple of qualifications. Firstly, *I do not speak here for Islam and much less representing the Muslims* here. While I am inspired by and drew my understanding and interpretation of the realities and the world from Islamic scriptures and traditions, as a Muslim, my understanding and interpretation are of mine, and never to represent the close to two billion Muslims in the world today. Not infrequently, popular media has depicted Islam and Muslims through the lens of the Arabs. Many more associate Islam and Muslims with countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). We recognize that Islam was revealed in the Arab land and among the Arabs of Mecca and Medina, and that Prophet Muhammad was an Arab, his close companions and early Muslims were mainly the Arabs. This however does not render the Arabs the sole authoritative interpreters of Islam. Following the death of Prophet Muhammad, Islam had quickly and vastly spread through expansive geographical spaces and considerable historical times. Today, Arab Muslims are estimated to form probably no more than one third of world Muslim population. Two-thirds of Muslims live in the Asia-Pacific region, within remarkably and enormously diverse and plural societies. The area I come from, namely the Southeast Asia or the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, holds more Muslims than the Arab region. In fact, more Muslims live in Indonesia alone (est. more than 210 million) than the Arabs combined in the Middle East; and Indonesia is a home to incredibly plural and diverse peoples and cultures. Recently, there seemed to be a euphoria in the popular media of women now being allowed to drive in the Saudi Arabia, a mark of Muslim women liberation from suppression. But, how is Muslim women disallowed from driving on public roads an “Islamic” suppression of women? How and why am I burdened by this cultural practice of a less than one point percentage of the Muslims in the world? Why are Muslims around the world burdened by the cultural practices of a small society? A great majority of Muslim women have been driving, and more, in many parts of the world. I read this report not with a smile, let alone a euphoric feeling, but rather amused and confused. Therefore, let me reiterate the point that I stand and speak here as a Muslim, but I don't claim to speak for Islam or on behalf of Muslims.

Secondly, minority mentality is a false state of mind. I stand here today as a Muslim. And I know that there is only a handful Muslims present here today. I am, theologically, a minority. Nonetheless, I do not consider myself as a minority, because I truly believe that ethically I am not a minority. I am present here today among friends, among “us,” who believe in common good and shared aspirations. I am not among my “others.” I am among friends and fellow seekers and sojourners in a shared ethical

journey. Socio-political categories change and morph over time. In my tradition, who constitute the *Protected People (ahl al-Dhimmah)*¹ and the *People of the book (Ahl al-Kitāb)*² varied over socio-political spaces and times. These “others” were not immutable as permanent categories. These are socio-political categories, albeit based on theological identity that had changed and varied over time. For instance, in the Sultanate of Aceh, arguably the strongest Islamic sultanate in the Malay Archipelago in the seventeenth century, *ahl al-Dhimmah* and *ahl al-Kitāb* were not known to be employed in managing the peoples and administering the Islamic law, although these are concepts and categories well discussed in standard Islamic legal texts. This brings me to the next point I wish to highlight, notably the idea of an Ethical God.

Theological and Ethical God

By theological and ethical god I do not mean mutually exclusive gods. I mean aspects of god we all believe in. As religious people, we believe not only in the theological aspect of God. But what is even more important is the ethical significance of god: the ethical attributes of God and the ethical principles that god asks us to uphold, whatever religious traditions and beliefs we belong to. These ethical principles include the notion of justice, right and wrong, sanctity and dignity of lives, not only of human’s but of all creations, freedom and accountability, honesty, and respect. These ethical principles are shared by all religions, whatever “theological gods” one believes in. It is these common principles that we should focus on, particularly in this “broken world,” instead of the theologies that separate and divide us. What should be of our concern today is the “ethical others,” and not the “theological others.”

It is by Divine Will and sign of Divine Power that peoples were created and raised out of varying tribes, nations and beliefs. “O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most god-fearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.” (al-Qur’ān: 49:13). And had he wished to make all peoples of one nation, He would have done so, but His Mercy had wished otherwise; “To every one of you We have appointed a right way and an open road. If God had willed, He would have made you one nation; but that He may try you in what has come to you. So be you forward in good works; unto God shall you return, all together; and He will tell you of that whereon you were at variance.” (al-Qur’ān: 5:48). Diversity is God’s Plan and God’s Wisdom.

Our enemies are not the theological others, but rather the ethical others: injustice and evil. And I draw this understanding from my scripture. God says in the Qur’ān, “God forbids you not, as regards those who have not fought you in religion’s cause, nor expelled you from your habitations, that you should be kindly to them, and act justly towards them; surely God loves the just. God only forbids you as to those who have fought you in religion’s cause, and expelled you from your habitations, and have supported in your expulsion that you should take them for friends. And whosoever takes them for friends, they are the evildoers.” (al-Qur’ān, 60: 8-9). Elsewhere, God says, “Surely Satan (evil) is an enemy to you; so take him for an enemy. He calls his party only that they may be among the inhabitants of the Blaze.” (al-Qur’ān: 35:6). God reminds us that there should be no hostility against others except on the oppressors, “And fight them on until there is no more persecution or oppression, and there

¹ *Ahl al-Dhimmah* or the *Dhimmis* are the non-Muslims living under Islamic polity protected of their rights for life, property and belief.

² These refer to the Jews and Christians who were given the books. However, in varying times they also included the Sabaeans, Zoroastrians, Magians, and Samaritans. They enjoy the status of the *Dhimmis* in Islamic polity.

prevail justice and faith in God; but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practise oppression (evildoers).” (al-Qur’ān: 2: 193).

Concluding Remarks: Reviving the Ethical beings and Godly Attributes

Let me conclude here by making an appeal to all to revive the ethical and moral principles and teachings of our respective religious traditions. Different, and probably conflicting, theologies and rituals are here to stay. The Divine so desires that these to remain as Sign of the Divine Mercy. For, God is the Most Merciful and Most Forgiving. Whatever mercy that we enjoy in this world, it is only one part of God’s mercies, while the rest is kept for the Hereafter. In a Prophetic tradition, Muhammad said, “Verily, there are one hundred (parts of) mercy for God, and it is one part of this mercy by virtue of which there is mutual love between the people, and ninety-nine reserved for the Day of Resurrection.” In the Qur’ān, God exhibits the vastness of His Mercy, “And prescribe for us in this world good, and in the world to come; we have repented unto Thee.’ Said He,’ My chastisement -- I smite with it whom I will; and My mercy embraces all things, and I shall prescribe it for those who are god-fearing and pay the alms, and those who indeed believe in Our signs.” (al-Qur’ān: 7:156). A call to see all first as fellow human beings, and not as the “theological others.” And for this, I stand before you today, not as a minority other, but as a member of the majority ethical beings, partners in this journey.