

Statement of His Excellency Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary General Organization of Islamic Conference at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

(October 4, 2005, Strasbourg)

Mr. President,

Honorable Parliamentarians,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor and privilege for me to address the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to President Rene' van der Linden for extending an invitation to address the distinguished Parliamentarians on the theme of 'Education and religion'. This occasion also gives me an opportunity to address issues intrinsically linked to the theme. Beginning of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue in this august house will go a long way to promote understanding between cultures and religions. I fully support your commendable endeavors and encourage other forums in Europe to follow the example of the council by institutionalizing debate on the most pressing issue of our time.

I have the distinct honor to represent, the only Muslim inter-governmental organization which has members in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America composed of 57 states and many Non-Muslim Observers including the recently admitted Russian Federation last June in Sana'a' Yemen. The OIC is the world's second largest inter-governmental organization next to the United Nations, representing a population of 1.3 billion people almost one fifth of humanity.

Our Organization was created to espouse the political manifestation of the Muslim countries but, its foundation is on the shared cultural, spiritual and common heritage of the Muslim community. That shared heritage is based on the knowledge which was inculcated through Islamic values derived from sources both revealed and secular which conforms to the model of human excellence based on dignity, respect for life, liberty and equitable and moral standards for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The universality of Islamic faith has been an accepted fact recognized by successive generations of scholars both by its proponents and opponents right in

the heart of Europe over the centuries and no one could deny that the Islamic beliefs and values have any other source than knowledge, education and religious tolerance. I may like to recall that flourishing Andalusian culture under Muslim rule in Spain and the Balkans cultural heritage under the Ottoman patronage.

The inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue has been erected on the edifice of tolerance among the human beings and Islamic values provided that framework for a tolerant society fourteen centuries back in the shape of Covenant of Madinah and last sermon of Prophet Muhammad. Inter-religious co-existence has not been a new phenomenon in the Muslim countries but was, as important issue at the dawn of Islam as it is today. The Muslim society right from its birth decided to march with the core values of respect for the human dignity, regardless of color, creed, faith, social status, or ethnic origin.

The followers of Islam during the past fourteen centuries, developed a radiant civilization that stood for international values of human rights, justice, tolerance, compassion, and peaceful co-existence with other civilizations and faiths. The holy Koran informs the humanity in Chapter 2, verse 136. the following and I quote:

“Say (O Muslims), we believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ismail and Isaac and Jacob and the Tribes and that which Moses and Jews received, and that which the prophets received from their lord. We make no distinctions between them, and unto Him we have surrendered”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is true that in the early phases of western awareness of Islam, it was perceived as mystery, a menace, but on the political and practical levels, it imposed relations of diverse nature that was, co-existence, trade, crusades, contacts, discoveries and there was also a genuine attempt to understand Islam and its impact on the then Christian world.

History of Islam witnessed co-existence between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. That interaction led to the sharing of philosophy and sciences, and, I refer here in particular the transfer of Hellenistic knowledge to Muslim world and the rise of science, philosophy and arts in Islam that were transferred to Europe and had its effect on successive generations. It was a

profound contribution by the Muslims widely acknowledged and clearly demonstrates the common roots and sources of our universal civilization.

Honorable Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I wish to inform you that Muslims have also conversely benefited from the west and gratefully acknowledge the benefits derived from western thought and progress. But there are aggrieved Muslims whose grievances are not against the material and technological progress of the western civilization, but those have arisen out of political and historical injustices which manifested in the shape of imperialism and colonialism. Even those grievances would have demised long ago, if we had been able to create a sense of accommodation between our two civilizations based on common heritage and had worked more closely with each other.

The most important step required by our modern civilization should be to shun prejudices against each other based on the past grievances and we should stop looking at the reality through our old prisms. Islam values knowledge and deliberation in all human actions and there has to be a rational and intellectual justification for one's conduct. On that premise one safely argues that path of moderation is the best course for an individual and any individual who refutes that by becoming an extremist must be going against the spirit of Islamic values. Extremism has never been a popular doctrine among the Muslim masses and despite modern terrorists' potentialities to harm large number of people, their clientele is limited. Narrow interpretation of any edict of Islam out of context cannot be attributed to the consensus of the Muslims. No political or religious doctrine or thesis has ever gained acceptance which has not been consensual. It is the Muslims consensus that extremism runs contrary to intellectual fibre of Islam.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The events which unfolded in the last five decades in the Middle Eastern conflict led to demonizing everything linked to Islam. The drop scene was 9/11 which though, received wide and far condemnation of the Muslims, was nevertheless directly attributed not to the individuals but to Islam. Majority in the west while covering the Muslims and Islam in the media never paused even for one second to look back to ask, that since when, an act of individuals could be

the reason to condemn the one fifth of humanity and which parliament or political movement endorsed erratic and gross criminal behavior of few individuals. Obviously, no one has ever come with such evidence. In the context of the role of same media, honest review would inform us that burning issues of the time where Muslims are victims have never been addressed by them sincerely. We have unsettled political disputes, unjust drawn borders and illegal occupation of territories. The unjust treatment to the Palestinians, their continued misery, and lack of recognition of their fundamental right needs to be mentioned here. Those overarching injustices are the causes for turmoil which should be rectified through the scale of justice.

Let me remind you once again that Muslim populations suffered from depredation, occupation, ethnic cleansing, and massacres --- all in our age of enlightenment. Conversely among the Muslim nations that sad experience generated a pervasive sense of disappointment. In recent years, war in Iraq without legitimacy gave one further jolt to the faith of Muslims in the efficacy of international order.

Honorable Parliamentarians,

I have not come before you to complain about history. I spoke of the past only because it is essential to understand the present and to contemplate the future. Confronting the past helps us to understand why we are here and how to chart a new course for the future, if this is our common wish. As we meet here today, we cannot overlook the sad reality of mounting wave of intolerance between Islam and the West.

European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), in its annual activity report published in June 2005, defines Islamophobia among the main trends that require attention and action in the future. ECRI draws the conclusion that "Islamophobia continues to manifest itself in different guises. Muslim communities are the target of negative attitudes, and sometimes violence and harassment. They suffer multiple forms of discrimination, including sometimes from certain public institutions. ECRI is worried about the current climate of hostility against persons who are or are believed to be Muslim." These incidents have become more frequent after the events of September 11, compounded by gruesome attacks in Istanbul, Madrid, Cairo, Karachi, London and only this week repetition of killings in Bali.

At the same time since September 11, Muslims throughout the world are increasingly victimized with collective guilt and dishonor. They have been stigmatized as terrorists. A new

wave of racism against Muslims was born in the aftermath of 9/11 based on religious grounds. The term of “Islamic terrorism” has gained popular usage in the international media, as well as in official discourse.

The picture I have depicted may seem gloomy and bleak, but unfortunately it is real. The Muslim world finds itself besieged by accusations of all sorts, often based on misrepresentations that fuel erroneous perceptions.

In short, we are confronted with a major contemporary challenge. Together we should not allow the relationship between two great monotheistic religions and civilizations to be defined in mutually antagonistic terms. This is our common challenge. This is the main message I want to convey to you today. I have come to tell you that, for our part, we are ready to work with you to avoid sliding into such a path, with disastrous consequences for global peace, stability and cooperation.

Distinguished Parliamentarians,

We have solid reasons to be together, deal with one another and flourish together. Let me state why.

First: Geographical Proximity, Islam and the West are close neighbors. Nobody can change the geography, as they say. So, we should try to make the best of it. Islam teaches good neighborly relations. Neighbors were almost considered to be among legal inheritors in Islamic law. Neighborliness is meant to be friendship, compassion, cooperation and solidarity.

Second: Common values. When we rectify the negative images depicted about Islam through the onslaught of Islamophobia, old and new, one would realize that Islam has since its inception, seeks to bring out the best in human nature. Islam laid down the foundation of human rights and dignity, asserted the supremacy of the values of justice and equality among all beings. There is no inherent conflict between Islam and modernity and Muslims are no less committed to pluralism and the respect of the right of people to cherish their diversity. Islam has been teaching for centuries principles, which have later become the principles of international human rights law.

Third: Common Spiritual Reference. Islam, as a part of the entire history of monotheistic religions, is a continuity of Judeo-Christian traditions and culture.

With all these elements of rapprochement, the Islamic world and the West are destined to coexist and prosper together.

That is a strong basis from which we can build a better future. For that, we need an open and critical dialogue to take place between us, which should include intellectuals and civil society representatives. Together we need to address the root causes of the misunderstandings and conflicts, assess them and come up with a realistic approach that might lead to convergence of views and thus try to build a Historic Reconciliation Pact. This would be an immense achievement from which all humanity would stand to benefit.

To pave the road leading to this goal, we propose the following steps:

Give official recognition to Islam as given to other mainstream religions in the European states which would infuse confidence and inter-faith harmony.

Revise educational syllabi at all levels on both sides, particularly in key disciplines such as history, philosophy, social and human sciences with the aim of presenting a balanced view of other cultures and civilizations.

Establish genuine inter-cultural dialogue at local, national, regional and international levels.

Promote tolerance and encourage debate within the intelligentsia and media about their responsibility to avoid perpetuating prejudices.

Develop campaigns to foster and disseminate respect for culture, religious pluralism, and cultural diversity.

Ensure freedom of religious practices without prejudice to secular laws.

Address the root causes of terrorism including political conflicts.

Exert an effort to engender a positive sense of belonging and responsible citizenship among Muslim youth and give them more incentives to participate in the mainstream of public life.

Prosecute and punish for racial discrimination and acts of violence through the framework of appropriate legislation.

Strengthen existing legislation on discrimination and discriminatory and “unequal treatment” adopted by EU council directives.

No doubt these are gigantic steps. At least some of these can be jointly undertaken through a structured cooperation between the Council of Europe and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The OIC is ready to explore the ways and means of establishing such a structural cooperation. In proposing an ongoing dialogue with the Council of Europe, we are cognizant of

the very valuable work your organization has carried out for more than five decades in fostering human rights, good governance, cultural cooperation, history teaching, social cohesion, good practices in local government among other activities.

As we live in interdependent world, and in the age of globalization and cultural diversity, it is incumbent upon European and Muslim states to open a new chapter of friendly cooperation based on a new vision of tolerance and friendship.

We should transcend the misunderstandings of the past and even the present to usher in a new epoch of historic reconciliation, concord and harmony.

For centuries, Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together in harmony and peace in the lands of Islam, giving to the world an example of fraternity among faiths.

Now, the geography, the values and the common spiritual references are there to bring us together again. So let us work together to respond to this challenge.

I thank you for your attention.