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**TRIALOGUE OF ABRAHAMIC FAITHS;  
Towards the Alliance of Civilizations**

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Seen from an Islamic perspective, the three religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—have their shared origin in the personage of Abraham (Arabic, Ibrahim). That is why the three are called in the Qur'an *millah Ibrahim*, Abrahamic 'way of life', or rather, religions. The three religions have a great deal of similarities and affinities as well as shared histories in the land now known as the Middle East. But at the same time the three religions are siblings that each of them is unique in itself. Therefore, they are different in their own way that in the end brought them into misunderstanding and conflict.

Despite differences, furthermore, there is no question that we are all the children of Abraham who are part and parcel of one single humanity, coming from one single parents, Adam and Eve. Despite all differences in races, religions, cultures, economic well-being, political systems and the like, children of Abraham are all brothers and sisters. So that they and

human beings as a whole should be able to live in harmony and peaceful co-existence.

Living in harmony and peace makes it possible for groups of people, including the adherents of Abrahamic religions to forge an alliance of civilizations. Bulliet (2004) has suggested the use the term ‘Islam-Judeo-Christian Civilization’ maintaining that the relations of the three religions is more simply scriptural, but also includes civilizations. In fact, there has been prolonged intertwining of these sibling societies that created profound intellectual and cultural cross-fertilization not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe and beyond.

But, the fact is that besides of intellectual and cultural cross-enrichment and cross-fertilization, the history of Children of Abraham have also been colored by tension, conflicts, and wars that destructive not only for human life, but also for the human civilization as a whole. That is why now it is the duty for all of us to recreate a new narrative of an alliance of civilizations both among Children of Abraham and the rest of humanity.

### **Conflict and Accommodation**

Looking at the totality of relations among the followers of the three Abrahamic faiths, again it is clear that picture is not always encouraging. Recent events in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 has resulted in the worsening relations among them; in fact it in certain way could be worse now than when Islam first became known to the Judeo-Christian world—or more precisely in Europe—with the establishment of the first contacts between them and the Muslims as early as the seventh century. In the first one hundred years of Islam, the extent of Islam’s territorial expansion continued to gain momentum. Byzantium and Spain confronted the Muslims

across the battlefields of Eastern and Western Europe respectively to no avail; and Muslims in the end held sway in the areas.

There is no doubt that the expansion of Islam was painful for Europe because much of European territory was lost to Muslim forces. The “Crusade” between 1095 and 1250 was the European response to the spread of Islam. Beginning in the eleventh century, the crusaders under the Frankist knights made serious and concerted attempts to arrest the development of “Muhammadanism” in Europe. The Crusade, as the word implies, was believed as a struggle to save Christian Europe by warding off the “barbaric” Muslims. The series of bloody encounters, which took place in the numerous Crusades that followed, constituted a major part of European history. Even though the Europeans in the had successfully re-conquered the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims in 1492, they faced a new strong force of Muslims, the Ottomans, who had made their way into Southeastern Europe.

Despite these harsh encounters and contacts, and despite the Muslims allowing the European Christians and Jews to remain in territory conquered by Muslims, European understanding of Islam was basically minimal. In fact, the Europeans launched continued propaganda to tarnish the image of Islam; this religion was held in contempt, it was condemned as false, and the Prophet Muhammad was depicted as “anti-Christ” or infidel the scourge of God. This attitude went on for centuries. It was only since the second half of the twentieth century that this kind of perception of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad was somewhat corrected. Other than this, misperceptions and distortions of the image of Islam and the Muslims remain strong among much of the Western public.

Throughout the history of its relationship with Islam and the Muslims, Europe’s understanding and appreciation of Islam and Muslims was

generally negative; hostility remained the basic feature of attitude among Europeans. There had been, however, some Christian notables who tried to learn about Islam and to change the attitude of the Christians for the better towards Islam and Muslims. One of the most prominent among them was Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny, who initiated the first Latin translation of the Qur'an, Muslim legends, history and an explanation of Islamic teachings. These works contributed significantly to a better understanding of Islam and Muslims in Europe. Other works soon followed the suit.

During the Renaissance, a number of prominent Europeans further tried to acquire a better understanding of Islam. After the Turkish defeat of Byzantium, John of Segovia pointed to the need to deal with Islam and the Muslims in other ways besides wars and conversion. He initiated a new translation of the Qur'an in cooperation with Muslim jurists. He also proposed an international conference to exchange opinion between Muslims and Christians. All of these were conducted in order to have a better grasp of Islam and Muslims.

In addition, during the Renaissance, Arabic and Islamic studies were initiated in many institutions, which led to a more balanced and accurate view of Islam and the Muslims; this is the origin of a field of study known as "Orientalism". Unfortunately, Orientalism was developed and practiced not only for academic purposes, but also for the interest of colonialism and evangelization in the Muslim lands. Since the early 1970s, Orientalism has been severely criticized for retaining certain biases and distorted images of Islam and Muslims (cf. Said, 1978). As a result, a new approach to Islamic and Muslim studies has evolved, and the term Orientalism and

“Orientalists”, have tended to become “dirty” words; the term “Islamic studies” and “Islamicists” have been increasingly adopted instead.

It is also now widely recognized that various aspects of Islamic civilization have contributed greatly to the rise of Europe and the West as a whole. There is an abundance of literature devoted to these subjects and there is no need to dwell on it.

But it is important to point out that in the period of Muslim rule in Spain, Jewish and Muslim thinkers and scientists worked together to produce what might be called as ‘Judeo-Muslim civilization’. This ‘alliance of civilization’ continued in North Africa and Arabia after the rest of Muslims and Jews, escaping inquisition, were driven out from Spain by the victorious Christian. In fact, Jewish civilization was said to have experienced a kind of revival under the Muslim rule in North Africa, Arabia and Ottoman Turkey.

The Muslims during the heyday of Islamic civilization not only preserved Greek learning, but also made a considerable original contribution to the increased knowledge of nature with their research and experiments. Various kinds of knowledge and sciences that had been developed by Muslim scientists were later transmitted to Europe. The Muslims, therefore, with their intellectual supremacy in scientific discovery, and in the physical and natural sciences, prepared the ground for the European Renaissance. All of these in turn produced what might be called ‘Islamo-Christian civilization’.

Therefore, it is now increasingly recognized by the historian of human civilizations that Western civilization owed its origins not only to the Greek, but also to the Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions that had mutually interacted through centuries. That is why that it is not really appropriate to

talk about the ‘clash of civilizations’, particularly among the Children of Abraham.

To conclude it is relevant indeed to quote *Alliance of Civilization* (2006) on this particular point that notwithstanding historical period of tension and confrontation between adherents of the three monotheistic [Abrahamic] religions—conflicts which themselves were often more political than religious in nature—it is important to note that peaceful co-existence, beneficial trade and reciprocal learning have been hallmarks of relations between Christianity, Islam and Judaism from their earliest period until today. During medieval times, Islamic civilization was a major source of innovation, knowledge acquisition, and scientific advancement that contributed to the emergence of Renaissance and the Enlightenment of Europe.

What is the role of the three Abrahamic religions in conflict and peace, particularly among their adherents? Arguably there are certain verses in each and every Holy Books that could contain or incite conflict among them, but they must not be taken as the perfect representation of any of the three Abrahamic religions, for there is not doubt that the essence of religions is peace on earth. Or, there are individuals in the name of certain Abrahamic religion who wage conflict, violence, terrorism, and even war; but, again, they are no representatives of that particular religion; in fact they are misled and on the fringe of that religion. The bulk majority of adherents of Abrahamic religions are peace-loving people who respect diversity and pluralism and love to live in harmony and peace.

Therefore, I would suggest that the idea that any of Abrahamic religions plays an important role in conflict is misleading. One should try not

to associate any particular religion with conflict and violence let alone to perceive it as the source of conflict and violence. Conflict and violence conducted by certain adherents of a particular religion are the result of various factors, particularly politics and economic, that have nothing to do with religion and God.

Therefore, we may suggest that religions are sources of harmony and peace; but we have to admit that at the same time Abrahamic religions as any other religion had been and could be used by certain individuals or groups of believers as a justification of conflict, violence and even war. In recent times, the use and abuse of religions for political purposes have been in a steady increase; the tendency is even stronger when in the midst of political uncertainties, economic deprivation, and cultural alienation, more and more people look for religion as *the* only solace they can get. Combined with literal understanding of religion and search for ‘authenticity’, the tendency of radicalism and violence in the name of religion is, no doubt, gaining a greater ground. Confronting these tendencies, mainstream religious organizations and institutions have a crucial role to play; they should enhance their capacity to explicate and disseminate the true peaceful nature of religions. It is now high time for mainstream religious organizations and institutions to raise their voices and to intensify their activities against the use and abuse of religions; and work together to create lasting harmony and peace for peoples and nations.

There are many other factors or root-causes that contribute to the failure of followers of the three religions, or human beings as a whole, to live in harmony and peace. Underlying these factors or root-causes is the existence of various kinds of structural violence. Most of the structural violence is the result of uncontrolled lust in the part of individual and groups

of people. Therefore, these root-causes of tension, conflicts, and wars, should be resolved by abolishing structural violence in order for all of us to be able to talk about peace, harmony and peaceful co-existence. So long as we fail to resolve those root-causes, we will continue to fail live in harmony and peace.

In order to create peace and harmony, there must be concerted efforts of all of us to bring about a more balanced economy and resources. It is no secret that most of the economic resources are only in the hands of the few countries; while a large part of human being continue to live under poverty line and miserable condition. It is clear that it would be difficult to talk about peace and harmony while economic disparity continue to hold sway in many parts of the globe; the poor and the deprived are to some extent more prone to violence. But, it is now even more unfortunate that the discrepancy in economic well-being and welfare is increasing steadily because of the seemingly unstoppable economic globalization that in effect gives the privilege few a greater economic power and domination over the poor and the deprived.

Harmony and peace is clearly very difficult to create when ‘cultural imperialism’ is also a dominant feature of life today; due to continued increased of globalization a large part of human being are now only receiving ends of cultural hegemony and imperialism. There is a lot of indications that radicalism and violence among some people to some extent is the result of looking for cultural identity or cultural and religious authenticity in the midst of cultural disorientation and dislocation.

To create harmony and peace in this kind of sorry situation, we all should adopt the paradigm of multi-culturalism. Through this paradigm of multi-culturalism, people will recognize the rights of cultures of other

peoples to exist. Only through the politics of cultural recognition we all can prevent the globe from being involved in the so-called 'conflict of cultures', or even worse 'conflict of civilizations'.

Our time has also seen the rise of violence and in fact terrorism in the name of religion that involves children of Abraham. In such a situation how could they create an alliance of civilization? To answer this complex question, one need to go beyond the surface of conflict, violence and terrorism.

It is again clear that root-causes of conflict, violence or terrorism in the name of religion are very complex; in fact there are some kind of combination of various factors including politics, economics, and to some extents also certain teachings or interpretation of religions. In most cases, politics seems to be the most important factor (cf Azra 2005a). To take the most recent cases of terrorism in Indonesia such the Bali I (2002), Jakarta Marriot (2003), Kuningan Jakarta (2004), and Bali II (2005) bombings, it is apparent that politics, both domestic and international, is the main cause of terrorism. At the domestic level, the perpetrators of the bombings have been motivated by their anger and hatred to Indonesian political system that they regarded as being 'un-Islamic'. This is particularly true when Megawati Soekarnoputri was the president of the Republic of Indonesia; for them it is unlawful for woman to become the leader (*imam*) of state whose bulk majority of population is Muslim.

As for international politics, it is clear that even before the tragic events of September 11 in the USA, the Muslim perpetrators of terrorism have condemned certain injustices in international politics and relations. For them the US and other Western countries are the enemies of Islam and Muslims. Western countries, particularly the US, are basically hostile to

Islam and the Muslim world. In fact, they believe, the US and other Western countries have conspired to destroy Islam and Muslims. A number of international cases such as the US continued support to Israel at the expense of the Palestinian, the US military campaign in Afghanistan and Iraq have only added fuel to their anger and hatred to the US and its allies.

One of the most important root-causes is the continued existence of structural violence that in turn produced a great deal of political, economic, technological, and cultural injustices at virtually all levels of life, from local, national to international levels. At the international level—where we would love to imagine the existence of ‘one single humanity’ and alliance of civilizations—political injustices and violence continue to take place. Look at what happens in Iraq, where the international powers and international institutions such as the United Nations fail to halt the US military campaign. In fact the UN continues to be dominated by the US and its allies in order to justify their injustices and in effect maintain the structural violence.

Look also at what is going on in Palestine, Afghanistan, and many other places. Those who possess hard power, and military might, continue to impose their will upon other peoples. Cornered harshly by these seemingly invincible forces, these people responded by any means necessary or taking up arms; indeed some of them become suicide bombers, blowing up other peoples and themselves. Again, all of these violence and injustices are taking place in the front of the international agencies, particularly the UN. Circles of violence among warring groups of peoples continue to sacrifice innocent human beings and the civilized world. These are some of the very blatant form of structural violence that continues to hold sway among human beings and their civilizations.

This kind of violence can not be resolved unless we are able to put an end to the political structural violence at the international level. Towards that end, international institutions such as the UN must be reformed and restructured. There is no secret that the UN, particularly the Security Council has been and is still dominated great powers; the UN has continued to succumb to the wish of those who voted against the resolutions that aim to create peace and harmony among peoples and nations. Concerned nations and peoples, therefore, must continue to fight for the reforms of the UN.

That is also the case with other international institutions such as the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), expected among others to protect Muslim nations and communities from political and economic structural violence. In the midst of increased problems faced by Muslims following the unfortunate events such as September 11, 2001, Bali bombing I (2002) and II (2005), Madrid bombing (March 10, 2004), London bombing (July 7, 2005), OIC should be able to play a better role in the mediation of the conflict. It is unfortunate that OIC has been afflicted by continued rivalries and quarrels among its members that, in the end, it fails to play its role in the creation of peace and harmony. Therefore, the OIC members should try to put aside their differences and work for harmony and peace for the peoples and nations.

### **Alliance of Civilizations**

The relations between children of Abraham, particularly in the Middle East, no doubt, have had a significant impact throughout the world. The continued Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major factor in the widening rift between the Muslim and Jewish-Christian worlds. As stated in *Alliance of Civilizations* (2004: 17), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken a symbolic

value that colors cross-cultural and political relations among adherent of the three major monotheistic faiths [Judaism, Christianity and Islam] well beyond its geographic scope.

Therefore, it is necessary to resolve the conflict by achieving a just and sustainable solutions; and this requires courage and bold vision and action of the future on the part of Israelis, Palestinian and all countries capable of influencing the course. The progress on this front rests on the recognition of both the Palestinian and Jewish national aspirations and on the establishment of two fully sovereign and independent states living side by side in peace and security. Some constructive agreements have been actually reached between those concerned parties such as the Madrid Conference (1991), the President Clinton Peace Initiative (2000), and the Arab League Peace Proposal (2002). What is needed now is the bravery and boldness among these children of Abraham to bring these accords further.

Looking at the whole history of the children of Abraham that had produced alliance of civilizations in the past and the initiatives taken recently to create peace in the Middle East, it is not really appropriate to talk about the 'clash of civilizations'. In fact, this 'theory' has unfortunately distorted the history of relations between cultures and civilizations. It has been shown that the relations between the children of Abraham are not only tension, conflicts and wars; but rather are full of constructive exchanges, cross-fertilization and peaceful co-existence throughout centuries. If there are conflicts now among children of Abraham and others, what we need is not theory of clash of civilizations, but a theory of alliance of civilizations.

In this respect, the initiative taken by the then Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) to launch the Alliance of Civilizations in 2005 should be applauded. Co-sponsored by Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey, the

Alliance of Civilizations affirms a broad consensus across nations, cultures and religions that all societies are bound together in their humanity and interdependent in their quest for stability, prosperity, and peaceful co-existence. Furthermore, the Alliance of Civilizations is based on a multi-polar perspective that promotes a culture of dialog and respect among all nations and cultures.

The Alliance of Civilizations put a special focus on relations between Western and Muslim societies that to certain extent are Judeo-Christian-Muslim societies. In the context of an alliance of civilizations among children of Abraham, there is an urgent need to find an acceptable solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As suggested earlier, the only acceptable and viable solution is the establishment and recognition of two fully independent states: Israel and Palestine. Without such a solution, it is not only very difficult to create peace in the Middle East, but also to forge an alliance of civilizations among the children of Abraham.

For that purpose, religious leaders of the children of Abraham have a special duty to play. They should be more resolute in promoting the teaching of Abrahamic religions on peace, harmony and peaceful co-existence. There also should be more dialogs and exchanges among these religious leaders, not only at the top level of leadership, but more importantly also at the mid and lower levels of leadership that are in direct contact with people at the grass-root. Only with these we can be optimistic of the peaceful future of children of Abraham.

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He is also a member of advisory board of a number of international institutions such as the Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia (2005-09); the US Institute of Global Ethics (2004-on); Center for the Study of Contemporary Islam, University of Melbourne (2005-09); the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF, New York, 2006-08); LibforAll (2006-on); and Asian Muslim Acton Network (AMAN, Bangkok 2004-now); IDEA International (Stockholm 2007-2009). He is also member of the Tripartite Forum [governments, UN offices and Civil Society organizations] for Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, Development and Human Dignity, launched at the UN in New York on March 24, 2006; External Evaluator of the Institute for the Study of Muslim Culture (ISMC, London, 2006-9); and head of Indonesian members in United Kingdom-Indonesian Islamic Advisory Group, formed by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and British Prime Minister Tony Blair in March 2006.

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