

Building Bridges of Understanding

The Church and the World of Islam

Introduction of Dr. Alwi Shihab

Boyd K. Packer

President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, gave this introduction of Dr. Alwi Shihab prior to Dr. Shihab's forum address given at Brigham Young University on October 10, 2006.

Dr. Alwi Abdurrahman Shihab was born in 1946 in Sulawesi, Indonesia. He and his wife, Ashraf, who is here on the stand today, are the parents of three children. Their son, Sammy, is here. He is eleven years old.

Dr. Shihab's significant governmental experience includes service in Indonesia's Parliament, as Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs (equivalent to our U.S. Secretary of State), and as a key leader of Indonesia's emergence from dictatorship to democracy.

Dr. Shihab is now Presidential Advisor and Special Envoy to the Middle East. This places him squarely in a region amid all the problems and struggles of the world.

Dr. Shihab is exceptionally accomplished. He holds five degrees (including two PhDs and a post-doctorate degree) from five universities in Egypt and the United States. He has taught or been a professor at seven universities in Indonesia and the United States. The first time I met him, he was a professor of Islamic Studies at Harvard University.

He is a world authority on Islamic law and has published widely on Islam and inter-religious harmony, including several books. A recent book was translated into English here at Brigham Young University. In that book he has a chapter on the Latter-day Saints. It is a very accurate and honest portrayal of who we are.

Ahead of us, indeed already all around us, is the world of Islam. Christianity and Islam will clasp hands in cooperation and understanding or clench fists in confrontation and prejudice.

A year or two ago, Brother Alwi and I met in San Diego. For a morning we sat, he with his Quran and I with my Book of Mormon, and compared and discussed the many things we have in common.

We have witnessed two watershed events: September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center terrorist attack brought Christians and Muslims into confrontation. The December 27, 2004, tsunami opened opportunity for Christians and Muslims to cooperate. The first was a wake-up call; the other pushed us out of bed.

The December 2004 tsunami, which devastated the Indian Ocean region, struck Indonesia particularly hard. Two days after the tsunami, I called Brother Alwi on his cell phone. He said, “I am standing at Banda Aceh, next to President Yudhoyono. You cannot believe what we see.” I told him we would help.

They first asked for 20,000 body bags. We located them in China and had them air-freighted to Jakarta. Not long after that, they asked for 30,000 more.

Dr. Alwi Shihab’s forum address was a historic occasion. It was unprecedented for a member of the Quorum of the Twelve to introduce a guest speaker—not just with a few words but with a significant message. President Packer manifested his love and respect for Dr. Shihab not just in his words, but also in the time and effort he put forth in traveling to Provo and spending the day with Dr. Shihab. These are clearly two men who not only respect each other but also have much of import to discuss.

September 11, 2001, alerted us that the U.S. has joined the rest of the world in being threatened by tactics of terror and force. The relation of Islam and the West is most often discussed as a clash of civilizations rather than a meeting of equals.

President Packer described the religion of Islam as a force for “decency, temperance, and morality,” not a danger to us. However, we have a choice in how to respond: “Ahead of us, indeed already all around us, is the world of Islam. Christianity and Islam will clasp hands in cooperation and understanding or clench fists in confrontation and prejudice.” In their addresses, President Packer and Dr. Shihab emphasized that radical interpretations threaten all—Christians, Muslims, and those of other faiths. They stressed that we can and must work together in harmony, not in conflict.

—Donna Lee Bowen, Professor
Middle Eastern Studies, BYU

Shortly thereafter, Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve, Dr. Gerrit Gong of Brigham Young University, and I traveled to Jakarta and then on to Banda Aceh which is on the north end of the island of Sumatra, vulnerable to the open ocean. We witnessed scenes words cannot describe. Over 200,000 were dead, families broken and dislocated, homes washed away. We saw one cemetery where 40,000 bodies had been buried.

The Doctrine and Covenants has this very interesting prophecy: “For after your testimony cometh the testimony of earthquakes, that shall cause groanings in the midst of her, and men shall fall upon the ground and shall not be able to stand.

“And also cometh the testimony of the voice of thunderings, and the voice of lightnings, and the voice of tempests, *and the voice of the waves of the sea heaving themselves beyond their bounds*” (D&C 88:89–90; italics added).

The First Presidency called a special fast for funds to aid the victims of the tsunami. The money flowed in—several million dollars.

Part of our purpose in traveling to Indonesia was to review the significant Church humanitarian relief to those hardest hit. The assistance began flowing immediately, and it continues today.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints expresses “special love and concern for the eternal welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father.”¹

We believe that “the great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.”²

It is not a coincidence that the world’s great religions come together at Temple Hill in modern-day Jerusalem. Known now as the Place of the Rock, it is a religious shrine for Islam, for Christianity, and for Judaism. All three great religions hold ties to this place. All three, likewise, have a common thread in a tradition that Elijah the prophet would return.³

Knit together by world history and by Old Testament history and doctrine, the Church and the Islamic world can see each other as People of the Book, indeed Family of the Book.

Church members and Muslims share similar high standards of decency, temperance, and morality. We have so much in common. As societal morality and behavior decline in an increasingly permissive world, the Church and many within Islam increasingly share natural affinities.

Muslim scholars point out that the Quran does not restrict Paradise to Muslims. The Quran rewards all those of faith who perform righteousness

and believe in the afterlife. The Book calls Jesus Christ Messiah, Son of Mary, and by the names Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word, and Spirit of God.⁴

It is important that we in the West understand there is a battle for the heart, soul, and direction of Islam and that not all Islam espouses violent jihad, as some Western media portray.

It is as well important that friends in the Islamic world understand there is a battle for the heart, soul, and direction of the Western world and that not all the West is morally decadent, as some Islamic media portray.

Several years ago, I was invited to speak at a convention of insurance executives in Vail, Colorado. On the way, we crossed the Colorado River.

We could see a new bridge in process of construction. It was an engineering marvel. Anchored to the sheer stone walls on both sides was an abutment for the bridge. Launching out into space from that abutment, reaching out for the other side, were sections of steel girders. When they met and were locked together in the middle, one thousand feet above the Colorado River, each would give strength to the other, and that bridge would be locked together over which traffic of all kinds could flow back and forth safely and conveniently.

Alwi, a devout Muslim of Arabic ancestry, and I, a Christian and devout Mormon, have agreed to symbolically walk arm in arm into the future. Together we hope to build a bridge. Except what that symbolizes is accomplished, all of us face a very dark and very dangerous future.

Now I introduce Dr. Alwi Shihab with a title which I borrow from another venerable Islamic leader and cleric (whom we both know and love), Abdurrahman Wahid, former president of Indonesia—Gus Dur. I apply that title to you, Alwi. You know that by interpretation it means “Dear Friend.”