

# Building Bridges to Harmony through Understanding

*Alwi Shihab*

It is indeed a great honor for me to address this forum, where academicians, scholars, and religious leaders are present to explore ways and means to foster global cooperation in building an ecumenical and harmonious interfaith community.

It is hardly necessary for me to remind you that Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world today. Indonesia also is the largest archipelagic state in the world, spread around some 17,000 islands that stretch along the equator from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific and cover a distance of 5,100 kilometers between its farthest points east and west. This is comparable to the distance between Los Angeles and New York.

It may, however, be important for me to stress two vital facts. First, Indonesia was not conquered by Muslim armies for Islam; rather, it was won by the piety and good examples of immigrant scholars, traders, and Sufi masters. Second, in Indonesia, communities of faith representing many if not most world religions live side by side in amity and peace most of the time.

It is worth noting that the Muslim world is too large and too diverse to march to the beat of a single drummer. Many people of the West mistakenly assume that the Muslim world is equivalent to the Middle East. The fact is that the Muslim world extends from Morocco to Merauke, Indonesia, and from Uzbekistan to Cape Town, South Africa. In addition, more Muslims live in China than in the Arabian Peninsula, and more Muslims live in Indonesia than in the entire Arab world combined.

Although Indonesia is more than 85 percent Muslim, it is neither an Islamic state nor a secular one. *Pancasila*, which literally means “five principles,” is the ideology of the nation and the state. These five principles are (1) belief in the One Supreme God, (2) humanitarianism, (3) Indonesia’s national unity, (4) democracy led by the wisdom of deliberations in representative bodies, and (5) social justice for all people.

Because the term *pancasila* is a human invention derived from Sanskrit and not from religious vocabularies, some observers argue that



Dr. Alwi Shihab, Brigham Young University Marriott Center, October 10, 2006. Courtesy Mark Philbrick and BYU.

Indonesia is a secular state. Such an observation is incorrect. Indonesia is not a secular state in the true meaning of complete separation between state and religion. In other words, Indonesian nations do not separate themselves from religious life and values.

Despite a greater presence of Islamic values and symbols in the contemporary Indonesian public and social space, the Indonesian people are far from rigid in their understanding of Islam. Among Indonesians the moderate understanding of Islamic teachings prevails. The peaceful manner by which the five major religions—namely, Hinduism,

Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism—were introduced to Indonesia has left a long-lasting positive influence on the promotion of mutual trust and tolerance among the communities of faith.

Unfortunately, the moral, spiritual, and social values that made Indonesia a model of religious pluralism and harmony are being challenged every day by religious, ideological, and political radicalism. It is a sad reality that even international efforts to counter radicalism and terrorism often themselves become radical—and, hence, counterproductive. We must, therefore, deal with religious radicalism and intolerance not with brute force but with wisdom and the willingness to address the root causes of these problems.

We have been driven by misfortune to the need for a mission of peace through inter-religious harmony. World spiritual leaders from all faiths should lead the world in this mission of respect, harmony, and cooperation among all believers and all races. Only in this way can we dissolve hatred and live in peace and security. It will not happen through force alone.

No one denies that Muslims are hurt and affected more than anyone else in relation to the several tragic events of late because the terrorists claimed an Islamic affiliation and justification—even though Islam never

condones, let alone endorses, any act of terror. This forum, I believe, can motivate and stimulate concerted efforts to bring together a wide range of perspectives, opinions, and backgrounds for the purpose of furthering constructive dialogue in mobilizing the force of moderation.

Through this academic gathering I want to invite us all to try to reflect with a clear mind and objectivity the root cause of such a dangerous phenomenon—namely, the religious radicalism encountered by humanity today. Indeed, our world has been thrust into a crisis of significant proportion. People are dying, hearts are breaking, and enmity is evident.

No one denies the rivalry between the world of Islam and the West. It has lasted more than fourteen centuries. Almost one hundred years after the birth of Islam, the Muslims managed to establish an empire that extended across North Africa, the Middle East, Iberia, Persia, and North India. Yet at the end of the eleventh century, after two centuries of stability, tensions began with the First Crusade in 1095. The long period of continuous encounter since then has demonstrated more of enmity, hostility, and prejudice than friendliness and understanding.

It goes without saying that the interaction between the world of Islam and the West is an important part of the structure of contemporary global affairs. Without positive relations between Islam and the West, a constructive global network of people and societies will not be possible. For almost a millennium and a half, Islam and the West have been viewed as two civilizations interacting in conflicting dialogue. To reach constructive dialogue and find solutions to the obstacles, it is important to think in terms of actual existing conditions in today's world of the twenty-first century and not impose concepts and programs from an earlier age.

The central reality of the twenty-first-century world with its spreading terrorism demonstrates that our era is globally interdependent but far from integrated. According to Norman Daniel, in his book *Islam and the West*, “Up to the present time, the mentality of the Middle Ages Christian (viewing Islam and Muslims as a real threat and the worst enemy) still lingers in the mind of many Westerners.”

With the same spirit and emphasis, Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund, former president of the Hartford Seminary—home to the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations—stated: “I deplore the lack of knowledge about Islam and other religious traditions that continues to characterize the contemporary Christian community.”

Indeed, one cannot deny that throughout the Western world there is tension between Westerners and Muslims. In many European countries Muslims are seen not only as outsiders but also as a menace, a threat, to

### Building Bridges the Right Way

Dr. Shihab and President Packer certainly practice what they preach. They go beyond mere tolerance and reach out in understanding, cooperation, and love. In February 2005, when he traveled to Indonesia to monitor tsunami relief, President Packer took time to visit Jakarta's white-domed Istiqlal Mosque. Following a tour of the mosque with the head cleric, President Packer asked if they might pray together. The cleric agreed. President Packer "blessed the mosque, the cleric and all who attend to pray and worship." Following the prayer, the tearful cleric thanked President Packer for "his faith and prayers on their behalf."<sup>1</sup>

For many years, all relief was given by the Church in Indonesia under the name of LDS Charities, with no mention of the Church's full name. In late November 2004, a devastating earthquake hit the island of Alor in southeastern Indonesia. The Church quickly responded with aid that was channeled through Dr. Shihab's ministry. Dr. Shihab was impressed that the Church was the first Christian church to respond to help the Muslims of Alor. With Dr. Shihab's blessing, all aid now sent to Indonesia is labeled with the full name of the Church.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the Alor relief effort, the Church once again quickly responded with aid for tsunami-ravaged Aceh. The Achenese noticed "Church of Jesus Christ" on the boxes and pallets, and so when later shipments were unloaded, leaders from the mosques announced "that another donation from the Jesus church had arrived."<sup>3</sup>

—Chad F. Emmett, Associate Professor  
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1. Dean C. Jensen, President of the Indonesia, Jakarta Mission, email message, March 1, 2005.

2. Elder Tom Palmer, humanitarian missionary directly involved with tsunami relief, email report, January 9, 2005.

3. H. David Burton, "Tender Hearts and Helping Hands," *Ensign* 36 (April 2006): 8.

European values and cultures. In many countries this tension is palpable; in some countries it remains subdued. But the West has never been very comfortable with Islam and Muslims.

With all frankness, Muslims should admit that they themselves have not always been able to present their case in a manner that is both understandable and acceptable to Western society. Sometimes Islam has been presented in a complicated way that the minds of common people hardly can absorb. And oftentimes Islam has been introduced in such a simplified way that it cannot reach the hearts of people. Such phenomenons have created an unnecessary misunderstanding that can bring about mistrust between Muslims and Westerners and often lead to a bitter feeling.

We all are aware that the West accommodates many faiths, including Islam. It is, therefore, essential that both Muslims and Westerners realize the urgent need to overcome the history of hostility between them in order to clear up the existing prejudices against Islam. In addition, we must always bear in mind that religion is not just an abstract doctrine or simple belief. It has been and continues to be the significant factor that shapes people's identities as individual persons and as groups. It is again our duty to find the way to harness the potential of religions to motivate their adherents to strive for peace, justice, and tolerance in everyday life and in all walks of life.

Unfortunately, for a long time many Westerners have believed that Islam is threatening their way of life. Likewise, many Muslims believe that the West is the source of the problem. I think one of the biggest challenges of our time is to comprehend and appreciate the values of Islam as well as the way of life and the mind of the West. No one denies that it has not been easy for the West to understand the spirit of Islam, nor for Muslims to accept the mind of the West; but, in the end, I believe, the West, if it is to understand Islam and the Muslims, has to adopt the faith and teachings of the *prophets of power or firm resolve*, as have been described by the Quran—namely, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

We all must strive to correct the erroneous perception in the mind of any Western intellectual who puts Islam today where communism was yesterday—against the West—and hence believes that dialogue between Islam and the West is a waste of time; that, therefore, the only way for the West to deal with Islam and Muslims is the argument of force, not the force of argument.

On the other hand, there are people in the Muslim countries who believe that the West is an old enemy of Islam, citing the history of past conflict. Accordingly, they believe that Muslims should fight the West.

They believe that there is no room for dialogue. There can be only dialectical opposition between the two.

Our problem in encountering the above radical views lies in the fact that those who promote the idea of religious and cultural conflict take Islam as their starting point for the idea of clashing civilizations. They ignore the fact that Islam is not communism. In fact, Islam is far removed from communist values.

Islam is the very way of a life that is compatible with common reason and human decency—and, thus, democratic values, freedom, and human rights. In addition, the Muslim world is a great diversity of nations and cultures united by the idea of human goodwill, respect, love, and justice among all nations.

Islam has never been the reason for the suspension of freedom. On the contrary, Islam has taught humanity that there shall be no compulsion in religion. There shall be freedom in religion because the lie cannot be imposed and the truth needs no force.

Islam, as vividly presented by the Quran, is a universal teaching that does not limit itself to geographical boundaries or ethnic and racial backgrounds. Indeed, it is beyond the East and the West. The Quranic verse says:

You should know by now that it is not the Right Way only to face your faces towards East and West. But the Right Way is for you to have trust in God, and in the Day of accountability, and in Angels, and in the Book, and in the God's Messengers. It is the Right Way also that you spend your property for your kin in need, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the freedom of slaves. Also, the Right Way is to hold fast to prayer, to observe prescribed charity, to honor the contracts which you have made, to be firm and patient in hardship, and to overcome times of fear. Such people are on the Right Way to the truth and they are close to God. (Quran 2:177)

Islam, indeed, is beyond the East and the West because Jews, Christians, and Muslims share the belief in one God who created us all from a single soul and then scattered us like seeds into countless human beings. They share the same father, Adam, and mother, Eve. They share Noah's ark for salvation and Abraham's faith, they share respect for Moses and love for the virgin Mary and admiration for her son Jesus, and they share the clear word of the Quran of promoting good and preventing evil.

It is, therefore, important to remember the major elements the three Abrahamic religions have in common to enable each of the respective adherents to feel close affinity to one another. In fact, Islam describes Judaism and Christianity as People of the Book, indicating that all the three religions are of one and the same family.

They all come from the same Hebraic roots and claim Abraham as their originating ancestor. All three traditions are religions of ethical monotheism; that is, they all claim there is one, loving, just, creator God and that God expects all human beings to live in love and justice. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all religions of revelation. In all three religions this revelation has two special vehicles: prophets and scriptures.

The relation between the Quran and the Bible is repeatedly mentioned in the Quran. The Quran expressly claims this relationship and calls the attention of the Prophet Muhammad himself to this relationship. Here is, among others, a verse that especially acknowledges this relationship: “And this Quran is not such as could be forged by those besides Allah, but it is a verification of that which is before it and a clear explanation of the Book, there is no doubt in it, from the Lord of the worlds” (Quran 10:37).

It is, therefore, imperative that Jews, Christians, and Muslims learn how to share their common spiritual roots and their common futuristic hopes without prejudice in order to avoid discrimination and religious and racial hatred so that they all can raise their children in peace and security on the basis of “Ethics of Sharing.”

In other words, we must create in ourselves the sense that there are many paths to God, that the people of each path are held in special relationship to God; each chosen, not only for a mission but also for a special love. The three religions are like siblings in a healthy family; we may have great differences and competition, but in the end we must try to protect each other from danger and ill fate. We must try to pull together to mend the world around us in some small way.

Let me suggest, dear brothers and sisters, that religious tolerance is not enough. We have often seen—particularly after the tragic events of 9/11 and, most recently, the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad—that tolerance does not always lead to true social peace and harmony. To tolerate something is to learn to live with it, even when you think it is wrong and downright evil. Often tolerance is a tolerance of indifference, which is at best a grudging willingness to put up with something or someone you hate and wish would go away. We must go, I believe, beyond tolerance if we are to achieve harmony in our world. We must move the adherents of different faiths from a position of strife and tension to one of harmony and understanding by promoting a multifaith and pluralistic society. We must strive for acceptance of the other based on understanding and respect. Nor should we stop even at mere acceptance of the other; rather, we must accept the other as one of us in humanity and, above all, in dignity.



Dr. Alwi Shihab and President Packer visit with family and associates in the Marriott Center prior to the forum address. Courtesy Mark Philbrick and BYU.

The Quran tells us, “We have honored the children of Adam, have carried them on land and sea, provided them with good and wholesome things and have preferred them over many of Our creations” (Quran 17:70).

We must respect this God-given dignity in every human being, even in our enemies. For the goal of all human relations—whether they are religious, social, political, or economic—ought to be cooperation and mutual respect.

This goal can only be achieved through meaningful and constructive dialogue among the people of faith in every religious tradition. Nor should dialogue be limited to interfaith dialogue; it should touch on human rights and political and economic issues, as well as issues of social justice and the right of all people everywhere to live in security, prosperity, and peace.

We must not try to reduce our social, racial, and religious diversity to global uniformity or make it the cause of conflict and strife; rather, we must celebrate it as a manifestation of divine wisdom and mercy.

The Quran says, “Surely, the most honored of you in the sight of God is he/she who is most righteous” (Quran 49:13).

Indeed, we are living in a difficult time, and we have to realize that the best way to begin working for peace is to build it up from within.

It depends on us. The solution to the ignorance, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness that lead to hatred is within ourselves, within our communities.

It is our burden and our challenge to find solutions to these global problems. The solutions, as Shakespeare would have said, lie in ourselves, not in the stars under which we were born (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.140–41), which is precisely what the Quran states: “We can only change our human condition if there is a change in our individual makeup and outlooks as well as our soul and mind” (Quran 13:11).

The greatest lesson from any conflict that touches upon religious sensibility is that the global community cannot allow such conflict in any part of the world to fester because it will, sooner or later, generate dangerous complications elsewhere. It is, therefore, important to establish interaction and understanding across cultures as the best safeguard against acts of terror. We have to maintain an uncompromising stance towards those who would utilize terror to achieve their goals.

The unity of the civilized world in fighting the horror of radicalism against both sides (Western and Islamic) is absolutely indispensable. Educating the next generation and preventing them from brainwashing with hatred and ignorance are our shared moral duties.

I strongly believe that true harmony comes from resolving historical hatred and increasing mutual care and love. The only sure path to peace requires that we work to end the misunderstanding and resentment that afflicts individuals, communities, and nations. Religious leaders, in particular, must reflect if they have preached God’s love for all people universally—beyond nation, religion, and race.

It is our collective responsibility through this forum to find ways and means to overcome the tragic barriers that divide religious believers—not only those of different religions but also believers of the same religion. Religious leaders should seek valid theological foundations abundant in different religious texts on which to build religious tolerance and a culture of respect and acceptance.

With all honesty and sincerity we should confess that nobody knows where the dialogue between us will lead. But what we all ought to believe is that there must be an alternative to so much global violence and hatred. Therefore, in closing, let me invite you all to respond to the crisis of values that pervades so many regions of our world. Let us together try to reach out to the hearts and minds of our communities, strengthen the voice of moderation, and isolate the force of extremism and radicalism. May the fruits of this academic forum be a positive step forward on the long and difficult road to harmony among all of God’s children.

God bless us all.

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Dr. Alwi Shihab is the former Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Presidential Advisor and Special Envoy to the Middle East from the Republic of Indonesia.

1. "Statement of the First Presidency regarding God's Love for All Mankind," February 15, 1978.

2. "Statement of the First Presidency," February 15, 1978.

3. See Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 117.

4. See Alwi Shihab, "Jesus in the Quran," Inter-Religious Dialogue Seminar, Spring 1992; Alwi Shihab, "Christian-Muslim Relations in the Twenty-first Century," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 1 (January 2004): 65-77.