



**INTERFAITH TOLERANCE EDUCATION TO COMBAT EXTREMISM
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Inculcation of Tolerance: The Means to Countering Extremism

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His Highness Shaykh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al-Nahyan, His Excellency
Ambassador Sam Brownback, auspicious guests and attendees:

I address each participant with his or her name and beautiful qualities.
Peace be upon you, and God’s blessings and mercy.

In this meeting, I will attempt, with brevity in my remarks, to address the
subject of inculcating tolerance. This subject has immense import, both
timely and necessary, in addition to being of great difficulty. The
philosopher Immanuel Kant said, “There are two human discoveries worthy
of a man considering them among the most difficult affairs: the governance
of people and the art of raising them.”

However, the significance of these two aspects of our human condition
increases, and its importance multiplies as we talk about them in the country
of Shaykh Zayed—who founded this country upon the values of tolerance
and co-existence—especially this year that the country’s leadership has
entitled “The Year of Tolerance,” making it the central virtue of all initiatives
and measures in the state.

On Inculcation of Character

Education is not equivalent to upbringing, which involves the inculcation of character. Instead, education is largely the transfer of information and the transmission of various abilities and skills, while upbringing concerns the refinement of character, the rectification of conduct, and the enhancement of ethics.

Moral upbringing remains essential to education, and whenever a disconnect occurs between them, imbalance results. The human being is a moral creature. Any education that excludes the inculcation of virtue and does not take into account the character and behavior of the students naturally violates an essential condition that contains within it the centrality of ethics in education.

Upbringing is not just learning subjects or topics. It is an integrated human pursuit in which the character of the teacher as a role model plays a fundamental role. It may be relatively easy to study mathematics or biology, but real difficulty arises in our attempts at raising future generations committed to high standards of probity, positive outlooks, and respect for others.

Upbringing: The Perpetual Suspect

Upbringing is the perpetual suspect in any human deviation or crisis, and even when an urgent crisis requires a quick treatment that addresses only the superficial symptoms, such as prohibitive measures, we, nonetheless, find that the greater reliance must be on understanding the hidden link between the milieu that informs the upbringing and those deviations that result from it.

This accusation always intensifies when it concerns religious education and those social sciences that involve sensitive issues, such as history, philosophy, and sociology. These sciences, indeed, inform us and set forth our understandings and perspectives that, in turn, regulate our behavior, both as individuals and as societies.

In every conflict or period of strained relationships, you find fingers pointing at religion or—to use another expression—religious teachings, and this accusation is reinforced when we look at experiences from history in which “religious” wars indeed have a share in the history of human conflict, which can be traced back to the first conflict in which Cain aggressed upon Abel at the outset of our species’ story with the first parents. At least we believers in prophecy hold to that conviction, especially those of us from the Abrahamic family.

The Failure of An Approach that Removes Religion from Education

In many parts of the world and in some of the Muslims lands, an attempt to remove religious subjects from the public sphere as a way of neutralizing the harmful effects of religion has dominated. This is a matter that has relied sometimes on the force of law, and several recent philosophers have speculated that this approach acts as some kind of magic bullet in the West that has been afflicted by the fire of religious wars, believing that religious identity leads to the collapse of the spirit of shared citizenship and the end of tolerance, especially in weak societies that have multiple ethnicities, sects, and groups. Hence, when the rule of law weakens, the religious identity transgresses, and every sect retreats into its own religious silo, given that the silo guarantees for it a sense of personal protection, even for its very existence.

The argument of those philosophers was strengthened by historical religious minorities that have lived under extremely oppressive conditions and were ruled by other religious groups who criminalized anyone who disagreed with them, and those who differed in their beliefs were accused of heresy. Or, if they differed in their religious practice, they were faulted as schismatics. In such a context, filled as it was with religious conflict, the understanding of tolerance emerged that transcended the various sects and denominations, which led to, for instance, John Locke’s reinterpreting various verses the Holy Bible in order to promote this understanding. For this reason, some Protestants actually claim that tolerance is a Protestant gift to the world.

However, our historical experience asserts the ineffectiveness of such an approach, even in countries that have a strong secular tradition, whereby, in

some of these countries, we have religious plurality that now has a profound presence in them. These countries are seeking new approaches to redress previous methods and to introduce religious teachings in a manner that affords the new generation an understanding of various different beliefs as a way of gaining knowledge of one another.

The Counternarrative Approach to Extremism

In contradistinction to the limited previous approach, we in the United Arab Emirates rely upon an approach that we find more efficacious and more appropriate to the local context. This approach centers on the understanding that religion is akin to energy: it can either facilitate flourishing and stability or, on the other hand, wreak havoc and destruction. Essentially, religion serves as a powerful source of peace, caritas, and solidarity. However, religiosity potentially moves from acts of charity to active enmity.

We know for certain that those religions associated with the Abrahamic family as well as other religions and human philosophies unmistakably contain within their texts the basis for coexistence. Moreover, their essential teachings concerning peace, coexistence, universal human dignity, and respect of religious differences can work as powerful instruments capable of countering violent religious extremism. Thus, the foundation of such an approach involves presenting a counter narrative to the extremist narrative and taking refuge in sound interpretations that are appropriate to our time and place and actually serve our collective needs.

Indeed, firmly grounded scholars are quite capable of grappling with such issues. A sound selection from among the various texts and opinions will be the preferred foundation for reviewing the various methods in order to correct inappropriate interpretations, aided by a reliance upon approaches better suited for coexistence through expanding the domain of a jurisprudence rooted in the universal aims and objectives of religion which we consider the soundest instrument for reasonable discourses and legal responses.

Examples of Applied Tolerance

At the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, we have been working to establish and put forth an alternative narrative in vital areas that have, for a long time, been exclusively the domain of the extremists' discourse. We have endeavored to methodically dismantle the underpinnings of the ideology of hate, correct misconceptions, and provide alternatives rooted in authentically Islamic teachings. Nature abhors a vacuum, so vague condemnations of extremist ideology without providing a tolerant alternative are insufficient.

That is precisely what the historic Marrakesh Declaration provided. It was an effort in which scholars declared for minorities of other faiths in Islamic countries equal rights before the law, full citizenship, and freedom to practice their religions. As such, it is a historic document in the establishment of tolerance and coexistence between different religions and peoples.

At the Muwatta Center for Research and Training, the Marrakesh Declaration is incorporated in the training of religious scholars in the United Arab Emirates. Through this program, a select group of young men and women are trained in a proper religious outlook, and that outlook is also informed by an awareness of the context in which they live. In this way, they can play a positive role in providing religious guidance that cultivates the values of tolerance and peace.

At the Muwatta Center, we started teaching a course on tolerance. I personally gave the first lectures and outlined our approach for both students and teachers. We teach this philosophy based on authentic teachings of the religion and its sacred texts. We teach them that the Prophet Muhammad himself—peace and blessings of God upon him—hosted Christians in his mosque where they performed their prayers and religious rituals with his permission as well as his protection. We teach them that in the very same verse that discusses the protection of mosques, the Qur'an states the importance of protecting churches and synagogues as well. The learned among the companions of the Prophet stated that the protection of these houses of worship does not fall upon adherents of those religions alone: it is the responsibility of Muslims as well. In this manner,

tolerance is elevated to the level of solidarity, and society ensures that religious pluralism is protected, and houses of worship are kept far from any conflict.

We firmly believe that faith and coexistence, and religion and peace can and must harmoniously live side by side. We also believe that inclusive citizenship can alter the landscape, such that religious affiliation becomes an impetus to realizing full citizenship for all citizens and neutralize the negative effects of religious difference.

Our methodology operates in three stages:

1. Collect all sacred texts related to the subject of coexistence for in-depth analysis of the entire body of such texts, so we may reach a judgment and understand the underlying spirit therein.
2. Correct the misinterpretation of the texts utilized by the extremists who argue against coexistence, and refute their arguments by proving the affirmative, in accordance with the rules of legal derivation and hermeneutics.
3. Ensure the appropriate application of Islamic teachings in the contemporary context, and convey that in the language of public space, to borrow the phrasing of Habermas, “the language of civil society and law.”

In addition, we also work to promote aspects of the alternative narrative through the United Arab Emirates Council for Islamic Fatwa, which we hope will serve as a model that leads to many other similar efforts, given that, in this age of telecommunications and globalization, the arena has actually become one. In doing so, we seek to apply an approach of tolerance to promote dialogue with even the most extreme segments of society. Even if that dialogue is not always convivial, it is beneficial and healthy for society as a whole.

The United Arab Emirates has also announced the adoption of the Document on Human Fraternity signed by Pope Francis, the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church, and the Grand Imam Sheikh Al-Azhar,

Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb into all educational institutions. The document will serve as a foundation in the effort to promote a philosophy of tolerance and peace.

An Appeal and A Priority

Generally speaking, this subject requires reexamination and a deep consideration, but this does not imply that current efforts should be eliminated or that they are even misguided, for that would be the other extreme. Rather, we should employ such efforts selectively and with a deep understanding and wisdom so that we can defend and restore that which has been adulterated by extremism and ignorance, which, in addition to other factors, are the main causes of the problem at hand.

Finally, I would like to point out that the current educational curricula are clearly incapable of meeting the challenge of the day. This is evidenced by the diminishment of independent legal reasoning that has led to the inability to keep pace with modern developments in the social sphere, as well as meager intellectual creativity. Therefore, we believe that it is imperative that we remedy this deficiency related to the humanities, logic, and philosophical theology, as it is necessary to restore the rational and discursive dimensions in contemporary religious studies. In this way, education is not merely rigid indoctrination without any rational foundation that would thereby confine the mind and restrict thought.

In closing, we echo the words of the former Director of UNESCO, Federico Mayor: “Let us educate for tolerance in our schools and communities, in our homes and our workplaces, and most of all, in our hearts and minds.”

This is what we strive to do in the United Arab Emirates.

May God’s peace and blessings be upon you.