



**Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies**

## **“COMMITMENT TO SPIRITUAL AND AESTHETIC CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC DIALOGUE”**

*H.R.H. Prince El Hassan Bin Talal*

Chairman and founder of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, Jordan.

---

**Abstract :** Speech by H.R.H Prince El Hassan Bin Talal Delivered During the Conference "800 ANNI" on the Occasion of 800 Years of the Visit of St. Francis to the Sultan Al-Kamil.

---

In the name of God, the compassionate and the merciful, I would like to first say that I, the servant of my Creator, believe in serving the public good. So, if our mission here is to further universality of goodness and virtue, then my purpose is fulfilled in joining you today. In the context of commitment to spiritual and aesthetic Christian and Islamic dialogue, may I just quote the words of Saint Francis to his brothers: “As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace in your hearts, thus no one will be provoked to anger or scandal because of you. Let everyone be drawn to peace and kindness through your peace and gentleness. Peace comes from the heart, and if peace can transform from within, then peace will guide the brothers as they travel through the world: Whatever house they enter, let them first say: Peace be to this house.’ Such peace is possible only through the sacrifice of one’s very self.”

In the words of the Meccan Illuminations of Muhyeddin Ibn Arabi, we find a corresponding echo, indeed Imam Ali bin Abi Talib said that “the human being is two peers; either a peer in belief (in your faith) or a peer in God’s creation”. It is providential, from a geographic stance, that we are born where we are and brought up in the religion in which we believe. So, Ibn Arabi, and I quote, says: “Do not praise your own faith exclusively so that you disbelieve all the rest. If you do this, you will miss much good. Nay, you will miss the whole truth of the matter. God, the Omniscient and the Omnipresent, cannot be confined to any one creed, for He says in the Quran, wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah. Everybody praises what he knows. His God is his own creature, and in praising it, he praises himself. Which he would not do if he were just, for his dislike is based on ignorance.”

I think maybe one of us could say something about the historic meeting between Al Malik Al Kamil Naser Addin bin Mohammad and Saint Francis. First, Al Malik Al Kamil was the fourth Ayyubid sultan of Egypt and the lands under Ayyubid rule in Syria and Palestine from 1218 until his death. I am quoting Taqi al-Din Ahmad al-Maqrizi, in his *Khitat*, or *Chronicles*, a contemporary source for the history of the Ayyubid Sultans.

We learn details about the characters, reigns, and struggles of the various Ayyubids, from their origins through Salahuddin and his successors. Al- Maqrizi describes conditions in the Holy Land and the Near East before the confrontations of holy wars.

Today we are here to ask ourselves, can we pay our duty, not to waging war but to waging peace? The absence of unified truth has made life unstable for everyone in the Levant, in our part of the world, and the situation has presented a unified response to the military interventions of many powers, not unlike you might say, the situation in the life of Saint Francis and the Sultan al Malik Al Adel. I am here largely because of a man of peace, whom I had the privilege of knowing, of the brothers Fr. Piccirillo<sup>1</sup>, who worked untiringly for decades to present us with the world map of mosaics in Madaba. And you speak of the Patron Saint of this big country, St Francis, I come here to speak of the powerful figure in our tradition, St John the Baptist. Next year we hope to be holding a meeting to revere the memory of St John in the context of what we now call the modern state of Jordan.

We have all been unjust to the other and we have all fought holy wars but I would like to say that Al Sultan Al Malik al Kamil was much loved by men of learning; preparing their society, listening to the traditions of the Prophet, and relating to education, building the Kamilyya college of traditions in Cairo. He loved discussion with scholars of whichever background, but let us not forget that this Levant was caught between the advancing Mongols on the one side and not only the fifth crusade, which is the subject of our discussion

today when St Francis met in Damietta with Al Sultan Al Malik Al Adel, but also of the Sixth and the Seventh Crusades. So you have the advance from the East of the Mongols who destroyed the East and the advance of the West. So, some of us might like to think when we meet and talk about “*medi terra*,” when and how will it become “*terra media*?”

As we look at this design of the Opera di Santa Croce, the floorplan is an Egyptian cross: it is the Sacred Geometry of Sacred Space in its connection between the microcosm and the macrocosm. And I ask myself, and I ask you, is it not possible one day to think of Jerusalem as combining the microcosm and the macrocosm of the management of holy space? We think of capital cities through time, but I cannot think of relevance in our troubled world to arts and sciences, the knowledge and inquiry coming together from India, Ancient Greece and from the Levant, building together a true alliance of cultures and a confluence of civilised achievement without thinking of the joyous esplanade of Jerusalem. The spectre of “the freeing of a wide range of people from great power domination” has been the history of the Levant and its renewed since the turmoil of the Levant – between and beyond the joyous esplanade of Jerusalem. The spectre of “the freeing of a wide range of people from great power domination” has been the history of the Levant and it is renewed since the turmoil of the Levant – between and beyond the two rivers. The Levant, Mesopotamia and Persian Iran.

The Age of Enlightenment, therefore, ladies and gentlemen, dear brothers and sisters, has benefited from the entire family of cultures that comprise our great human civilisation, has benefitted from the pilgrimage routes, the silk routes, the spice roots, but has it benefitted from the routes of hearts and minds? It is only in special events with which we are blessed that bring us together here today, that we can speak of synergies, symbiosis, that we can speak of the vibration of this living city, the city of Renaissance through time. Many have come from our part of the world, from the Levant, from the *Provincia Arabia Romana*, to Italy. I mention Nicomachus of Jerasa, another city in

what is today Jordan. Nicomachus' Greek multiplication table was the first to use what we now call Arabic numerals. Surely an appreciation of the evolution of man's search for knowledge across centuries can open a path to a universal consciousness that crosses cultures and creeds.

Was it not the search for knowledge that Saint Francis promoted in his conversations, and inspired I believe, European Muslims in 2006, to issue a declaration?

*« Europe is a common continent of many faiths, nations, languages, cultures and customs; and is proud of its road from Slavery to Freedom, let us not replace savory with subjectivity, from Mythology to Science, from Might to Right and from the Theory of State to the Legitimacy of State as well as Europe's commitment to the basic values of Human Rights and Democracy. »<sup>2</sup>*

It seems to me sometimes that we in the Levant when we speak of civil liberties in a country that has increased its population since the 1990s from 3 million to almost 11 million people (we used to be the population of Tuscany) that in reality, it is our right to look at refugees, nationals and migrants, of all the different nationalities, 53 of them, and talk of the ensemble of humanity. Yes, we are conscious about responsibilities in human rights, but I think today when we speak of the heritage of Andalus and Sepharad, we speak of social, cultural and moral development. How can this be with the continuous military confrontations, and let us be frank about it, the continuous greed which motivates politics in the world today?

The challenges of our time are of fostering inclusion, building respect between peoples, understanding which must precede comprehension, pluralism between peoples of different faiths and cultures. (And goodness knows the world is crying out for all of these.) In 1992 in Toledo and Cordoba, we spoke of reconciliation, we spoke of the translation of the Aljamiado; the sacred scripts and the anthropological descriptions of life in the

Iberian Peninsula, which were hidden by Jews, Sefarad, and Muslims, Andalus, before the arrival of the Inquisition, as if it were in anticipation. When I visited the Biblioteca Riccardiana yesterday, which is why Florence is so important to this new Enlightenment, I asked them and I ask all of you, please make these manuscripts available in facsimile so that more people all over the world can enjoy the wisdom of the past, for the past as prologue. The past is not only violence, the past is also encounters, *incontro*. And I wonder as I keep visiting and revisiting my poor Italian, and my even poorer Spanish, whether we cannot one day talk of a "camino de las ideas"? "Un camino mediterráneo-ibérico- américo-latino"?

Political theory, ladies and gentlemen, which is modified every day, used and abused, does, however, encourage us to find specific responses to immediate circumstances, and yet we are here to talk about a policy of human dignity. For me security is built into human dignity; I don't know about aeroplanes and advanced weaponry which cost trillions of dollars, but I do know that someday the crucial role of Italy and Catholicism would be recognized in promoting religious values, literature and historiography, driven and animated by demands that go far beyond the requirements of the moment. This is why I welcome Pope Francis' call for an Alliance of global education, for dismantling walls, ethnic and civil walls, linguistic separatism, for after all, if we seek "multiculturalization" of international capital, is this capital not also human capital?

I have tried in our interfaith conversations with Your Excellency (talking to Cardinal Ayuso) to emphasize the core, most fundamental values of the Holy Qur'an, which are justice ('*adl*), benevolence ('*ihسان*), wisdom ('*hikmah*) and compassion ('*rahmah*). During our discussions we will continue through this process to reaffirm the role of Christian and Islamic discourse, maybe even Jewish, Christian and Islamic discourse, for we believe in the continuum of our traditions; we believe in cultural heritage and the contributions of religion; we believe in thought that precedes

belief and I believe that we also recognize that the prominence of social media creates a virtuous platform, if we so wanted, and not only a virtual media exchange. So, we need the substance of illumination to be communicated through social media.

Isn't it true that our modern textbooks focus little on the connection between the microcosm and the macrocosm? Isn't it true that *Isbraq* (Illumination), the age-old belief that closeness to God can be attained through the search for truth? It is the essence of the scholarly works of Jews, Christians and Muslims, and signifies the intellectual enlightenment of their times, which leads to evolution (*istislah*) of social thought. So, I am here to thank you for planting the seeds of the Renaissance in the 13th Century and beyond, but maybe the time has come to talk about intellectual reciprocity and not just thanking the other. Europe's 17th Century, the Age of Reason and of discovery, had its analogy in the Arab- Islamic world of the 10th Century. The first university in Islam was in Mecca, the first tutoring in Islam was in Mecca, and there we spoke to people from all over the Muslim world: *ahl assunnah wal jamaah*, *shiat aal albayt*, *Jaafari*, *Zaidi*, *ibadi*. The fundamental common element of our faith has always been confidence in the good, human-loving, compassionate and merciful God.<sup>3</sup>

To know is to love you say, and I agree with you, but let us remind ourselves that some of the bloodiest and most brutal conflicts have occurred between people who know each other only too well. In the Caucasus, for instance, Christian Russia backed Muslim Abkhazia against Christian Georgia, while Muslim Iran played off Christian Armenia against Muslim Azerbaijan. I would like to conclude by saying that when we speak of disassembly – the similarity and differences among peoples – concepts like tradition, identity, religion, ideology, values, nation, surely, we are not reduced, now that the stark opposition of “East” and “West” has been exposed as the ethnocentric formula it always was (East is Moscow, the West is Washington, and every place else – Havana, Tokyo, Belgrade, Paris,

Cairo, Beijing, Johannesburg – is derivatively located). There are so it is said, no master narratives, about Identity, Tradition and Culture.

I think the time has come to talk of an analytical concordance of values of the Holy Books and to implement such a project. There is no more Jewish, Christian, Hindu, male, black, “they” than there is a Muslim “they.” People adhering to great faiths cover the globe and are from all national origins, skin colour, gender and cultures. The 1.8 billion Muslims in our world today fall into all of these categories and there is as much commonality among them as there are differences. The Chinese Uyghurs, Afghans, Persians, Iranians, Nigerians and the Bosnians and Saudi Arabians are different even though they are Muslims.

Our need to describe the physical world we inhabit ‘unity of existence’<sup>4</sup> (*wahdat al-wujud*), or the ‘unity of the real’, has three means at his disposal: I start with geometry and I conclude with geometry, which translates unity into the spatial order; rhythm, which reveals it in the temporal order and indirectly in space; and light which is to visible forms what Being is to limited existences. I don't want to focus on nation, or country or national flags, nor do I want to focus on cosmopolitanism and colloquialism, time does not permit, but I do believe, in concluding, by speaking of our need for networking, creatively building an international universal understanding of the importance of spiritual and aesthetic uplift. I conclude, and you mentioned Sufism, and I quote Al Hallaj:

*I am He whom I love,  
and He whom I love is I:  
We are two spirits  
dwelling in one body.  
If thou seest me,  
thou seest Him,  
And if thou seest Him,  
thou seest us both.*

In the words of Saint Francis, Il Signore vi dia pace! Grazie

## NOTES

1. Franciscan priest and archaeologist who became an expert on the mosaics of early churches in Jordan. Fr. Piccirillo was a biblical scholar, field archaeologist, mosaic specialist, Greek epigraphist and restoration expert of the Christian Holy Land. As director of the Archaeological Institute on Mount Nebo, in Jordan, during the 1980s and 1990s, Piccirillo presided over a succession of startling discoveries that have changed radically our perception of the status quo of the Christian communities of Jordan after the Muslim Conquest in AD 636, demonstrating that they were, in fact, both economically flourishing and artistically creative.
2. Ceric, Mustafa. "Islam: A Declaration of European Muslims." Radio Free Europe. 2006. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1066751.html>
3. Brussels Declaration *The Peace of God in the World Conference, December 19-20, 2019*.
4. Titus Burckhardt.