

Orasi Ilmiah

“The Global Political Trend and the Role of Islam: The Academic Responsibility of Muslim Scholars”

Lecture by: Dr. Nikolaos van Dam

Ambassador of the Netherlands

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السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

Your Excellency Dr. Maftuh Basyuni, Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia;

Dr. Fauzi Bowo, Governor of DKI Jakarta;

Prof. Dr. Nasaruddin Umar, Rector of *The Institute for Qur’anic Studies Jakarta*;

Excellencies, colleague Ambassadors of befriended states;

Respected invitees and graduates,

I have been asked to speak about “*The Global Political Trend and the Role of Islam: The Academic Responsibility of Muslim Scholars*”.

This will lead me also to a discussion about the issue of the responsibility of Western scholars and their dialogue with Muslim scholars. Together these scholars could play an important role in helping achieve a better understanding of Islam and the role it plays in global politics.

What is Islamic and what not?

It is not only important to explain what Islam really is, but it is also important to make a distinction between what, in fact, involves Islam, and what people have incorrectly associated with and attributed to it. What is the relation between Islam and the actions of people that practice the Muslim faith? In my opinion there are many things which have very little to do with Islam as a religion, but are nevertheless ascribed to it because the persons who are linked to it happen to be Muslims.

It should also be taken into account that certain radical actions have been carried out by Muslim individuals or groups in the name of Islam, but that those actions are not supported by the majority of Muslims, and are generally disapproved of by them, although sometimes the position of their disapproval is not explicit enough to create the impression that these radical Muslims that carry out these actions do not in any way represent any Muslim majority.

All this has contributed a lot to existing misunderstandings. A lot of these misunderstandings have to do with false perceptions, but not with academic reality. Although one might also argue that perceptions become academic realities if people believe their perceptions to be true. The responsibility of scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, is therefore to subject these perceptions to a reality test, particularly if this can help in providing a global forum which would help create a better mutual understanding, as well as a stronger cross-cultural friendship.

But not only scholars can give a helping hand. Governments and countries, too, can play an important role, particularly if they can fulfill the role of building a bridge between conflicting parties or cultures. But we must place these so-called bridge functions in the right perspective.

Bridge functions

Time and again I have heard about the potential "bridge functions" of certain countries, indicating that these countries could play an important role in helping improve understanding between different parties or cultures, or helping establish peace between hostile countries.

By way of an example: Indonesia is said to have the potential to play a large bridge function between the Islamic and Western world, in particular because it can be considered as a peaceful and successful democracy with a Muslim majority.

Turkey is supposed by some observers to be able to fulfill a bridging function between Europe and the Islamic world, because it is geographically located between them and is itself considered as both Muslim and democratic.

According to yet other – in my view unrealistic observers - Israel could fulfill a bridge function between the West and the Arab Middle East, whereas a democratic Iraq could be a bridge between the democratic West helping spread democracy in the Middle East, and so on. It seems as if the view of some of these observers is blurred or blinded by a kind of *fixation* on Islam as a religion, or democracy as an ideology.

Some countries are embellished with the epithet of being located at cross roads between various cultures or continents, or having geographic strategic importance. Turkey is seen by some as the cross roads between Europe and Asia, between the Christian and Muslim world. Egypt is part of both Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and therefore can play an important role in this context, and so on.

Some of these bridge visions which I just mentioned have also been expressed by various prominent Western politicians. What is essential in this respect, is to pose the question of whether or not the parties directly involved do themselves

appreciate such a bridge function of other mediating parties. If their perception of it is positive on both sides, then the chances of success are there.

But in the Arab Middle East, Israel is certainly not viewed as a potential candidate capable of fulfilling a bridge function with the West, because Israel is seen as an adversary, to put it mildly. The Arab states prefer their own direct contacts with the West and do not want third parties in between. The same applies to Turkey, being a non-Arab country. Being a Muslim democratic country does not make any difference.

Indonesia is from the Arab Middle Eastern perspective more often than not seen as a country in the periphery of the Islamic world, which thereby would not have a natural central role.

Nevertheless, if Indonesia is seen as an important bridge from the view of the West, it can be useful to further explore this view so as to help achieve a better relation between the West and what is viewed from there as “the Islamic world”. If that perception is not there, it may be helpful to convince them of its usefulness.

***Regional, cultural or religious identity?
African, European, Asiatic, Arab, Islamic or Christian?***

Today I want to report about some of my experiences with the Islamic dimension in various countries where I have lived as a diplomat, as an academic or as a student: chronologically in Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Germany and finally in Indonesia. With the exception of Germany all of these countries are considered as Islamic countries, or better said: countries all having an Islamic majority, and being members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Let me first, however, introduce myself to those who do not know me, and tell something about the countries where I have worked.

During the past twenty-one years I have worked as ambassador in Baghdad, Cairo, Ankara, Bonn-Berlin and Jakarta. Before that I was Charge d’ Affaires a.i. in Tripoli (Libya) and in 1980 I started my first posting abroad for the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beirut, Lebanon. From Lebanon I also covered Jordan, the Palestinian Occupied Territories and Cyprus. From Ankara I was co-accredited in Azarbaijan, and from Jakarta I also cover Timor Leste. As a student I made various study journeys to, among others, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

Many have noted that I have been working almost exclusively in Islamic countries. But you can also formulate it quite differently: I served in two African posts (Egypt and Libya), three Asiatic countries (Lebanon, Iraq and Indonesia), and in two European countries (Germany and Turkey). It just

depends on the glasses through which you are looking, or the way you *want* to see it.

Some will readily say that Egypt and Libya actually are not really African countries but Middle Eastern ones, irrespective of the fact that they are both located in the African continent and that their political leaders have over the years developed ideas clearly containing an African component.

Yet others have the opinion that also Lebanon, Syria and Iraq are not real Asiatic countries, and that they should actually be considered as Arab ones, irrespective of the fact that they are located in the Asian continent.

Again others will say that Turkey, when it really comes to the point, actually is not at all a European country, but actually more Middle Eastern. Nobody can deny the fact that the largest part of Turkey is geographically located in Asia, as is already indicated by the name of Asia Minor.

The Turkification of the population of Asia Minor, which today has the Turkish language as mother tongue, started only as late as the eleventh century as a result of the immigrations of Turkish tribes who came from Central Asia, and had, also because of their Altaic language a clear Asiatic background. But today many Turks prefer to call themselves Europeans because they want to belong to Europe, irrespective of the fact that the original ethnic Turks had a clear Asiatic background. This wish to be European also emanates from the Kemalist ideology which indicates that Turkey should direct itself more towards modern Europe, because it belongs more to that part of the world, irrespective of the fact that the former capital Istanbul originally was the center of the Islamic Ottoman Empire, which had its centre of gravity in the Middle East and North Africa, and not at all in Europe. (This is not to ignore the fact that the Ottoman Empire has also left clear traces in the Balkan, like for instance in Bosnia-Herzegovina. And in the past, the Ottoman Sultan was even called “The Sick Man of Europe”).

And to make it even more complex: being a Turk in modern Turkey no longer necessarily implies having a Turkish ethnic background, but rather having an identity which is linked to the territory of the Turkish state. Today one can speak of, for instance, Turks of Turkish ethnic origin, Turks of Kurdish ethnic origin, Turks of Arab ethnic origin, Turks of Armenian ethnic origin, and so on.

Although the number of Turks of Turkish ethnic origin may not be that big, the Turks of Turkey, or Turkey-Turks, nevertheless feel themselves linked with many of their Turkish-speaking “brothers and sisters” who live outside Turkey, like, for instance, the Turkish Cypriots, and the Turkic speaking populations of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and other Central Asiatic countries. And whereas the Turkey-Turks today are focused mainly on Europe, they at the same time wish to keep an eye on their Turkish speaking Asiatic brothers, preferably in the role of the bigger brother, whose attitude tends to be perceived by the other Turkish speaking parties as a kind of tutelage.

By way of analogy, one can speak of Indonesians of Javanese ethnic origin, of Minangkabau origin, of Bugis origin, Papua origin and so on, who are all bound together by their united and unifying language of Bahasa Indonesia, combined with their common territory of the Republic of Indonesia. Additionally, Indonesia has a special link with other Malay speaking countries in the region.

The separation of the Arab countries from the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century was at the time seen by the Young Turks as a kind of betrayal towards those Turks whose nationalism actually had very much in common with Arab nationalism. The Turkish nationalists actually reproached the Arab nationalists of wanting something similar as what they aimed for themselves: notably the establishment of their own national state, which was based on their respective ethnic or linguistic identity. It goes without saying that both parties – Turks and Arabs – were aiming at controlling as large a territory as possible. It did not disturb them if these territories would include also other important ethnic groups with a different ethnic or linguistic identity, different from the main ethnic group controlling the new nation-state.

But what about the geographical position of Indonesia? To which continent does it belong? When I received the good news about my transfer from Berlin, my previous posting, to Jakarta, the first thing I did was to go to a bookshop to look for travel guides about Indonesia. But in the sections dealing with Asia and South East Asia I could not find any book on Indonesia. Until I finally had a look in the section Oceania and the Pacific. I was surprised to find the Indonesia books in that section, until I realised that Indonesia actually covers two continents, of which the border line runs through the deep waterway between Bali and Lombok, at the so-called “Wallace Line”. To the east of this line we can find Kangaroos and other marsupials, but not to the west of it. The reason for this is clear: these animals in the past, when the sealevel was much lower, could not cross this sea straight because it remained too deep for them. As a result, divergent developments took place on both sides, also in the field of flora. But these deep straights did not prevent human beings from migrating all over the area which is today called the Archipelago.

The Austronesian languages spread out all over the area from Madagascar to New Zealand, but did not succeed in the past to penetrate into the Melanesian heartland of Papua. But in modern times this has started to change. Generally it can be said that the boundaries of Indonesia with its huge territory and extraordinary rich diversity, are not determined by ethnicity, language, or the fact of belonging to one or more continents, but rather by its colonial history. The colonial boundaries in the end became the boundaries of the Republic of Indonesia. Not one inch more and not one inch less.

Should one conclude that Indonesia is Asiatic? Or Oceanic? I am inclined to conclude that it is both, when taking the geographical, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of its population into consideration. But in my personal perception and my way of thinking, the Asiatic dimension generally prevails. This probably has to do with the political map of Indonesia with which I was raised. But perhaps also because, being a Dutchman, I am used to looking from West to East instead of the other way around (like an Australian would probably do). And I had never heard of that Wallace line before I went to Indonesia. When looking at it with hindsight, the Wallace Line is no more than a scientific discovery, be it a very important one. But this discovery has not had any consequences for the composition of the human population and the cultures of Indonesia.

The first political map which is imprinted in one's mind or memory, whether it be at school or elsewhere, is to a great extent decisive for the picture one has of the world. Usually it is a political map which is derived from the political realities of the day.

You may ask yourself why it is that I have given such a long introduction about the various postings I had. But that is only to demonstrate how different identities can be approached, or how they can even be manipulated. And how the importance which is ascribed to those identities can shift in the course of time.

Is it about regional, cultural or religious identities? Or is it about a combination of them, the composition of which is determined according to what suits the argument best? Or is it about periods of time in which certain ideas prevail? Such as nationalism, capitalism, socialism, secularism, religion or religious fundamentalism, or a combination of some of these factors? Is it about being African, European, Asiatic, Oceanic, Arab or Islamic, or even Christian? What was seen in the past as being Arab, is nowadays quite often also, or even more prominently seen as Islamic. Moroccan and Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands were in the past identified by their countries of origin, but today their so-called religious identity is placed to the foreground much more prominently.

People in Europe may look somewhat astonished when I mention that after Turkey I also had a "Christian" posting, notably Germany. (I shall leave the playful remark, made on the occasion of my official departure from Ankara to Berlin, that I was actually leaving for the largest Turkish city outside Turkey, out of consideration here).

I had never before considered the European countries as specifically "Christian". The more so I was surprised when the then Prime Minister of Turkey, Mrs.

Çiller announced somewhere in 1998 that the European Union should be branded as a “Christian club” in case it would not welcome Turkey into its ranks. I think that only few Europeans saw the European Union as a kind of Christian club. Nevertheless Mrs. Çiller had introduced a new religious element into the political game, which was difficult to undo later on.

Even today, many Europeans will still not see the European Union as a Christian organization, even though it is not uncommon to say that the EU is founded on Christian norms and values. Turkey, which at the time was considered to be a secular bulwark, also in the time of Prime Minister Çiller, is now being seen more and more as an Islamic country, irrespective of the fact that quite other factors have played a role here, next to the remarks of Mrs. Çiller. Nowadays the Islamic identity of Turkey is underlined by those within the European Union who do not like to see Turkey being taken up within their ranks.

Although I am aware of the fact that countries like Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Libya have clear Muslim majorities, I have never experienced these countries primarily as Muslim countries, but rather as countries with their own cultural identity, in which to me the Arab element was the most prominent. I experienced Turkey at the time in a similar way, particularly in modern Ankara. This is not to say that the Muslim identity was not there; because it was often present very clearly, but it was also very normal and obvious. But it was also determined by the attitude of its inhabitants towards the outside world, and of course by the position of the ruling regime concerning secularism or religion. Next to this, the way in which these countries were being treated by the outside world was also playing a role. There can be a clear interaction or interplay between action and reaction, as we have been able to see clearly in the period after the 11th of September 2001.

Since the early 1960s Iraq and Syria mainly had secular Arab nationalist regimes. Both attached importance to the role of Islam, but also saw Islam as an inseparable part of Arab national history, of which both Muslims and Christians could be fully fledged and equal heirs. (The Iraqi Ba’thist regime was deposed in 2003).

The Iraqi President Saddam Husayn during his speeches at the time put Arab historical figures like the Shi’i ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Sunni Mu’awiyah and the Kurdish Salah al-Din (al-Tikriti), and others on an equal footing as Arab national heroes, thereby wanting to bridge the sectarian differences within Iraqi society.

At the same time, Islamic fundamentalist organizations and movements were suppressed everywhere, because they were considered as – or they really constituted - a threat to the existing regimes. And I am referring to a period which has already lasted at least half a century, be it that after the 11th of September 2001 a lot has been put into motion and polarization has taken place.

Does Islam adapt itself to society or does society adapt itself to Islam?

Islam can be considered as a universalistic and all-comprising religion that touches upon all aspect of life of Muslims. But can this view also be turned the other way around? Are all aspects of life explainable through Islam? Or to put it differently, can all acts of Muslims or all developments in societies with a majority of Muslims, also sometimes called Islamic societies, be explained through Islam? In principle, I think, they could, from a Muslim perspective. But if they *could* be explained in one way or another through Islam, *should* they therefore also necessarily be explained through Islam? Particularly in a world in which not everyone is Muslim and where a great variety of religions live side by side together?

Some describe Indonesia as an Islamic state or country, although there are many people with other religions living here. They constitute some 10% of the population, making up some 24 million people. Of the 33 Provinces 10 have now a non-Muslim Governor. Instead of calling Indonesia an Islamic country, it is often preferred to describe it as “the country with the biggest Muslim population of the world”, having an official state ideology, the Pancasila, which could be described as secular and where the principle of “unity in diversity” is to be respected. It is even the slogan in the national weapon: “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*”.

Islam is a hot topic in the West and in the Islamic world itself

Islam is a hot topic in the West, and not only there, but also in the Islamic world itself. Many people talk about it, but much fewer people are knowledgeable about it. If you want to organize a seminar on “*democracy in South East Asia*”, for instance, it may not be that easy to raise funds for it. But if you add the word “Islam”, and make it about the role of democracy and Islam in South East Asia, the chances become much better.

Nevertheless it may be wrong to stress the idea of any connection between Islam and all kinds of developments in the world. The danger exists that Islam becomes a kind of *fixation*, thereby adding to a misunderstanding between Muslims and non-Muslims or between so-called Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries. It is as if a kind of polarization is being stimulated, exactly there where we do not want such a polarization.

After the 11th of September many people in the West thought they could have a much better understanding of what were the deeper backgrounds of what had happened in New York by reading the Qur’an. I was posted in Berlin at the time, and found out that for that reason the German translation of the meaning of the

Qur'an became the book most widely sold in Germany in this period. But could it help its readers much further in understanding what had happened? I do not think so. It may be of course very instructive to read the Qur'an, particularly for those who have not done yet, but to understand everything happening in the world is a different matter.

To fully understand the Qur'an one needs additional explanations and clarifications to the text. This applies also to those who are well versed in Qur'anic Arabic.

Sometimes one needs to read a lot of books in order to discover that one would not have had to read them after all. Sometimes things are much easier and simpler to explain.

Some have noted that "*the Islam*" does not really exist, because there are so many forms of Islam. I would argue, rather, that although Islam does have so many varieties and while there is such a rich diversity in Islamic communities, this does not exclude "*the Islam*" from existing. It merely means there are many different interpretations of it. Certain basic principles of Islam are the same everywhere. What is different are the regional and cultural diversities amongst Islamic communities.

Islam emanated in a specific Arabian social and cultural environment, existing in the Arabian peninsula at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). It is only natural, therefore, that the original Islam contains many Arab specifics. Although Islam can be said to be a universalistic religion, it can also be said that it started as an Arab religion, revealed in the Arabic language. This language is so much part of Islam, that it is considered inappropriate to do the ritual prayer (*Salat*) in any other language than Arabic. An Indonesian religious leader who led the ritual prayers in Indonesian was imprisoned for this.

The Arabic language enjoys great prestige in Indonesia. Nevertheless the number of people who have a clear command of the Arabic language in Indonesia is not very big. Perhaps this has even added to its prestige.

When Islam spread outside the Arabian Peninsula and came into contact with other cultures, Islam adapted itself to these regions in the sense that various local habits and traditions were not only being accepted as not contradicting those of Islam, but were later on also sometimes interpreted by the local populations as being in line with Islam, if not Islamic itself. Many people who as new Muslims continued part of their former traditions, gradually came to argue that these traditions were in fact part of Islam. In the traditional West Sumatra Minangkabau society, for instance, Minang culture is said to be based on Islam: "culture based on religion, which in turn is being based on the Qur'an". One might, however, also say that Islam has merged here to a large extent with local

culture, because Islamic religion and Adat are in this region perceived to be almost identical.

More generally, one might say that in large parts of Indonesia Islam has adapted itself to the local cultures and traditions, or has embedded itself into them, instead of fully adapting to the culture and traditions of the Arabian Peninsula the other way around. A similar phenomenon could be said to have taken place in other regions of what today is considered to be the Islamic world. In many places people interpret local habits or traditions as part of Islam, whereas in fact they are not really. Also cultural manifestations based on different religious-cultural backgrounds generally coexist peacefully together in Indonesia.

Some personal observations about culture and religion in Indonesia

I hope you do not mind when, as a non-Indonesian, I propose to share with you some of my personal observations about culture and religion in Indonesia. They are made from the perspective of a foreigner who for a long time has lived in other parts of the Islamic world, which are rather different from Indonesia. Just take a few examples from Indonesia in which culture and religion exist side by side:

- The Ramayana is a very popular epic Indonesia, Java in particular. When I saw this dance performed in Yogyakarta for the first time, I asked what the religion of the dancers was. The reply was that they were all Muslims. I was amazed because I considered the Ramayana performance to be Hindu, and therefore was surprised that the dance of another religion could be performed by Muslims. A friend of mine, who had studied Indonesia for a long time, explained, however, that the Ramayana should in this case not be considered as a Hindu dance, but rather as a performance which was an expression of Indonesian or Javanese culture. Therefore culture was the key concept here, not religion.

- Something similar is the case when you look at many of the Javanese mosques. As has been described by Prof. Pijper in his well-known study on the mosques of Java, the roof or roofs of the Javanese mosques consist of various layers, the forms of which go back to Hindu-Javanese times, and may symbolize various heavens. These have nothing to do with Islam, but rather with the heavens existing in Hinduism. Here, again, the present shape has nothing to do with Hindu religion, but is rather a residue of Hindu culture in Java.

- Whereas in many other countries with Islamic majorities the use of Arabic Islamic names is very popular, in Indonesia, Java in particular, it is more common to frequently use traditional Javanese names. For that reason it is often not possible to know someone's religious identity. But the ethnic and cultural

background is often easily recognized. It is another example of the fact that traditional culture is given a prominent place in Indonesian society.

- Quite particular is also the performing by women of reciting the Qur'an during opening ceremonies of important gatherings. In other Islamic or Arab countries I have never noticed such a phenomenon. It simply is an Indonesian tradition which reflects more the position of women in society than religion itself.

- Another special phenomenon in Indonesia is the greeting of different religious communities with their respective greeting formulas, even if one does not belong to one of these communities. When addressing a Muslim audience it is fully accepted in Indonesia to start with "*assalamu 'alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh*", also by non-Muslims (although not all Muslims appreciate this); when addressing Christians in for instance Manado one might start with "shalom", and in Bali the Buddhist greetings might be used. It is, however, appropriate to, after a religious formula, always add: "*Salam sejahtera bagi kita semua*", so as not to exclude anyone from being addressed.

When President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono started his opening of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Bali, December 2007, with the Muslim formulas "*Bismillahi al-Rahman al-Rahim*" and "*assalamu 'alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh*", the master of ceremonies followed in English by saying to all the guests: "welcome to the Island of the Gods", which is the commonly used name for Bali (*Pulau Dewata*). The special element here is that the plural of Gods is used, which normally would be considered as not in line with the principle of monotheism in a religion like Islam. But in Indonesia this terminology is fully acceptable, because it is understood as a cultural concept rather than a religious one. In this respect Indonesia differs from various other countries with a Muslim majority.

Compare the situation with a country like Malaysia where the usage of the word Allah is supposed to be prohibited to non-Muslims, whereas it is just the word for God in Arabic. The name 'Abd Allah is not uncommon among Christians in the Arab world, and was already in use in pre-Islamic times. The name of the Father of the Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) was 'Abd Allah as well, whereas he certainly was not a Muslim, because Islam did not yet exist in his time... It would be strange to have to say 'Abd al-Tuhan.

- Take another example of Indonesia: The Borobodur Hotel in Jakarta is full of Hindu statues and Gods, but nobody minds, because it is an expression of culture, just like Egypt has the statues of its Pharaohs and Egyptian gods and goddesses, whereas at the same time Egypt can be considered as a traditional Islamic religious country, and so on.

Other Islamic countries have their own examples concerning the local cultural heritage and Islam existing side by side.

It could be noted, for instance, that whereas in strongly traditional Islamic Saudi Arabia women are prohibited from driving a car, the same is allowed in the Islamic Republic of Iran. These differences have nothing to do with Islam itself, but rather with different cultures existing in these countries.

Similarly, the harsh treatment of women by the Taliban in Afghanistan is much more a reflection of regional tribal customs and attitudes than that is part of Islam. The acid throwing into the faces of women happens in wider parts of Asia, including in India and Cambodia, and can be seen as purely criminal. It goes so far as to fully mix up Islamic religion and other phenomena, which have nothing to do with Islam. Other examples are female circumcision, which is most widely spread in Africa, and the so-called honor killings.

But this does not prevent larger part of the non-Muslim world from perceiving these attitudes as being connected with Islam, which therefore generally has a non-favorable effect on the attitude towards Islam in the West.

Or take the example of whipping which is used as a type of *shari'ah*-punishment. Are people against such forms of corporal punishment as a matter of principle, or because they are part of Shari'ah? During a discussion on this issue with some Europeans, I once made the remark that similar punishments were also carried out in Singapore. The reaction of one of my non-Muslim counterparts was: "Yes, but that is not Shari'ah"...

Conclusion

I come to the end of my lecture of today, and want to draw the following conclusions.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have a common responsibility not only to explain many relevant issues about Islam. They should, however, also make clear what is *not* related to Islam, but rather to other factors, such as politics, culture and local traditions. In doing so, academics can not only help contribute to bridge misunderstandings and correct wrong perceptions. They can also create a better social and political climate which encourages mutual respect and tolerance. The same academics should help prevent a situation in which all kinds of unjustified connections between Islam and various developments and ideologies in the world are being suggested. The danger should be avoided that Islam becomes, or keeps being, a kind of *fixation* amongst some, which would only contribute to enlarge the misunderstanding between Muslims and non-Muslims or between so-called Muslim countries and so-called non-Muslim countries, instead of helping overcome such misunderstandings. It is as if a kind

of polarization is being stimulated, exactly there where we do not want such a polarization.

When exchanging views within the framework of an inter-cultural, or inter-faith dialogue, we do not necessarily have to discuss religious issues as such. After all, it is common for most believers to consider their own beliefs to be the best and most correct. What is more important is to discuss underlying values and beliefs, which the various parties may have in common.

Mutual respect for religious and cultural diversity can only enhance unity, both internationally as well as nationally. Those who have disrespect for religious and cultural diversity, because they think it might undermine unity, may just achieve the opposite and create disunity.

Thank you for your attention.

و السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

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