

SIXTH DAY: 26 JUNE 1953
H.E. PROFESSOR TAHA HUSSEIN (EGYPT)
MINISTER OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Mr. Mayor, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bring you the adherence of my country and of all the Islamic countries—an adherence to everything that has been said at this conference from its beginning until now; an adherence that I offer without any reservation, for our way of thinking is exactly the same as yours. There is no difference in our way of understanding and appreciating the values of the spirit that must be affirmed in the modern civilized world. And I say this not as a man of the twentieth century, enamored of your culture and your civilization and influenced by everything that I have learned here about European civilization, but I say it because I am a Muslim, and as such I am absolutely convinced that every Muslim, wherever he may live in the world, would say, in my place, exactly what I am saying.

The word Islam derives from the word *Salam*, which means peace—a word of immense significance not only in the Islamic language but throughout the world. Islam is entry into peace; every Muslim seeks to be at peace with God. But God is demanding: He is not satisfied with simple reconciliation; He requires that, once one is at peace with Him, one submit absolutely to Him. To be Muslim means to submit to God, to give Him one's heart, soul, and intellect—to give oneself to God without reservation. This is what Muslims believe. They are the children of Abraham, who submitted completely to God, to the point that when God commanded him to make the famous sacrifice, he found no word to say, for he had only to obey, without hesitation, the order that God had given him. And Abraham not only submitted himself, but also asked the same submission from his son. Father and son obeyed.

Islam means being at peace with God and, consequently, at peace with men. And it seems to me that on this point Islam and Christianity meet in a happy way. Christ was the promoter of peace on earth among men of goodwill, among those who submitted to the Heavenly Father and gave themselves entirely to God. The differences between Muslims and Christians, apart from doctrinal questions that only theologians must resolve, do not exist. We all think in exactly the same way; we have the same ideals of peace among men and of progress for the world.

The sacred book of Islam, the Qur'an, speaks of Christians and Christianity, but nowhere in our sacred text will one find a single word against them—that is, against true Christians, who know exactly what Christianity is and submit to it in purity of heart. It is different with the Christian who knows only the formalistic part of his faith. This type of Christian is criticized by the Qur'an because, evidently, he does not know God and says that God is one of three gods. I do not believe that Christians who truly know Christianity say that God is one of three. The Qur'an speaks of the Crucifixion of Christ, but it reproaches the Jews and the prophets who were proud of having crucified Jesus. The Qur'an says to them: "It was not you who crucified God, but God who willed it; therefore, you were mistaken."

It would suffice to cite the verses of the Qur'an addressed to Muslims. They combat pride and affirm that the closer men are to God, the more ready they are to be your friends and to love you:

there are priests and monks, and they are not proud; when they hear the true word of God, their eyes fill with tears: we have known the truth of God, we believe in Him, and we ask Him to inscribe us among the witnesses of Eternity.

When Muslims read these words in the Qur'an—and they do so morning and evening, and five times during the course of the day, even while working—they cannot imagine that there is any real difference between Christians and themselves, still less any reason for hatred. Father Daniélou said that one must accept the idea of the Fatherland and also accept the differences between fatherlands, but be content to accept them with love. I subscribe to these beautiful words of Father Daniélou and affirm that all Muslims ought to subscribe to this declaration. In the countries of Islam, Muslims and Christians and all others live side by side. Not only do Christians live in peace with Muslims, but Muslims also live in peace with those who are not Christians, and even with foreigners. In my country, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, and friars do not live merely to live, but live in order to teach. They have their schools and institutions, in which they teach not only Christians but also Muslims, who send their children to those schools.

Muslims and Christians live in perfect harmony with their Christian teachers. Christians also enter our national schools and universities; there are even some from Florence among them. There is no difficulty in common life between Christians and Muslims, and this not only in Egypt but also in other Islamic countries. Everywhere, coexistence is perfect. When you speak of Christian peace, we understand peace *tout court*, because there is not only Christian peace or Muslim peace, but universal and general peace. Peace as such has no religion; or rather, it has a single religion—that of God, which is the religion of peace.

We are gathered here to discuss and to see to what extent prayer and poetry can serve to establish peace in the world. Now, I know of no religion that values prayer, that insists that man pray and remain in constant relationship with God, as much as Islam does. This is not only because Islam imposes five prayers a day upon Muslims, nor only because prayer is among the essential rites in which man must participate, but because Islam is not content with the five ritual prayers; it also affirms that there is another form of prayer, much more important than ritual prayer: namely, the prayer of God's presence in the spirit of man, at every moment of the day and night.

The Qur'an commands the performance of ritual prayer; but the continuous presence of God is far more important than ritual prayer. The Qur'an is not satisfied with ritual prayer, but requires that the thought of God be present in the spirit, and it gives Muslims certain models of prayer, such as this:

“O God, we hear Your word, and we will obey You; we know that You do not lay upon a soul a burden greater than it can bear. O God, every soul benefits from the good it does, and every soul suffers the consequences of the evil it has committed on earth; O God, do not burden us nor demand too much of us; if we do not obey, do not impose upon us too harsh a punishment; do not give us a burden that we cannot bear; forgive us our sins, grant us Your mercy, and grant us victory over the unbelievers.”

“O God, Lord of the Universe, to You belongs the kingdom; You give it to whom You will; You take it away from whom You will; You give glory to whom You will and humble whom You will.

All good is in Your hands, and You have power over all things. You bring night into day, and You bring the living out of the dead and the dead out of the living, and You give life to whom You will.”

And there are many other models of such prayers given to Muslims by the Qur’an, so that when they are outside ritual prayer they may remain in contact with God. And at night we pray to God thus:

“Praise be to You, light of heaven and earth; praise be to You, Lord of heaven and earth; praise be to You, possessor of heaven and earth; Your promise is truth; Your word is truth; Your meeting is truth; Your paradise is truth; Your hell is truth; the prophets are truth; and the Last Judgment is truth. O God, I submit to You. In You I believe. In You I trust. Through You I argue with my adversaries, and before You I seek judgment. Forgive me the sins I have committed and those I may commit. You are my God, and there is no God but You.”

Thus Muslims have various prayers with which they may commune with God in the morning and evening, upon waking and upon sleeping, outside ritual prayer.

Toward poetry, the Qur’an has taken a clear position, condemning profane poets: “They teach many things that ought not to be followed. And those who commit evil deeds are oppressed.” Consequently, the Qur’an is opposed to profane poetry, but favorable to poetry that teaches men goodness—poetry that benefits those who do good. A poet may be accepted by Islam, provided he is a man of virtue who says things that benefit those who hear and learn them. Thus Islam condemns profane, vulgar poetry but recognizes poetry worthy of the name.

Muslims naturally have their poets, as does the whole world. They have profane poets, but they also have poets who are men of virtue: these are poets of the highest order.

You may ask your Orientalist scholars how closely Christian mysticism is related to Muslim mysticism, and how this mysticism penetrated Spain during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Muslim mysticism and Christian mysticism are very close to one another; they have the same sources, which are love of God and love of truth. The God of Muslims is the same as that of Christians; the prayer of Christians and that of Muslims are nearly the same, apart from certain formal differences. We accept these differences with love.

There was a Muslim poet who had freed himself from every formal constraint, who had examined Islam, studied Christianity and Judaism, and studied other religions, yet none of them had given him the peace of spirit he sought. He was an Arab poet who lived in the tenth century: he was blind—Abu al-Ala al-Ma’arri—who had read everything, had associated with Muslims, Christians, Jews, Persians, and others, and had emerged with a spirit completely freed from religious formalism. Yet he had never been able to free himself from the thought of God. He believed in God—in a wise God, a God who had created the world—but he could not understand revelation. After traveling through Islamic lands, he returned home and isolated himself from the world, remaining in his house for fifty years, seeing only his disciples and never going out. He renounced all pleasure. He ate only lentils and figs, when they were available, and for fifty years he led this pure, sober, and truly holy life—holy despite his denial of revelation.

I have read the prayers of this blind poet, which I believe have not yet been published in European languages, for they have only recently appeared in Arabic, and I do not know whether Orientalists are familiar with them. This man believed in prayer—the true prayer—not the kind performed merely for show, nor the kind performed to make others believe that one is addressing God. God does not love hypocrites, nor those who direct their prayer toward others rather than toward Him.

God requires that the man who prays address Him with an absolutely pure heart, and He requires that before praying, one examine one's conscience and purify it of everything that is not God.

When we wish to see whether prayer and poetry are effective means of establishing peace among nations, we must first examine our consciences to see whether we commit injustices toward others.

The day when Muslims and Christians are ready to meet not only with smiling faces but above all with pure and sincere hearts and consciences, prayer and poetry will be the most effective means of establishing lasting peace between Christianity and Islam.