

Islam and the West

Al-Jumhuriya, 14 October 1955.

It was truly a valuable gathering, that meeting in which a group of Muslim thinkers met with a group of Italian thinkers in the city of Venice, to speak in open frankness — or in free frankness — about the dispute between Islam and Western civilization, about the causes that provoked it and the results that arose from it, and about the means that might lead to settling this dispute and resuming a new life in which harmony and cooperation would take the place of disagreement and estrangement between Muslims in the lands of the earth and those who have made Western civilization their foundation.

The first merit of this gathering was that it was not composed of a great multitude, in which talk would multiply, opinions would scatter, and means and ends would be lost; rather, it was composed of a small number of people, Muslims and Italians, and no one from the other Western countries of Europe or America attended it — only the Italians attended on behalf of Western civilization, and a group of fewer than ten Muslims attended, among them two Iranians, an Iraqi, a Lebanese, a Turk, an Egyptian, and a Tunisian, all of them university men who had devoted themselves, or nearly devoted themselves, to culture and learning; the one invited from Syria was absent for a pressing reason, and Professor al-'Aqqad did not attend — would that he had been able to attend. Those who took part in this gathering from the Italian side were likewise few, all of them university men, though differing among themselves in the field of learning to which they had devoted themselves: among them a jurist, an economist, a professor of mathematics, and some orientalists. The second merit of this gathering was that it was not official: no governments were invited to it, nor did they take part in it, near or far, nor were institutions invited to it; rather, individuals were invited who were known for their standing in culture and learning, and for their prominent standing in their own countries. Politics, then, did not enter into this gathering, even though it was not free of talk of politics — for how could one speak of the affairs of East and West, and of the dispute between them, without being conversant with political discourse and its grave matters? The reader may ask about the origin of this gathering and who called it; and here is an account I would like Egyptians, and the wealthy among them especially, to reflect upon, for it is worthy of stirring a lesson and inviting extended thought and consideration.

A man among the wealthy of Italy, and among the wealthy of the city of Venice in particular, whom God had granted vast abundance of wealth — and how many there are to whom God has granted broad riches — had been struck by grief over his son five years before, and bore the calamity nobly, then made it a source of good for many Italian families. He established, on an island among the islands of Venice of historical importance, two institutes: one devoted to orphans, sons of men who worked at sea, who are raised there, taught the work of the sea, and trained in it, so that once they complete their education they take up the same work their fathers did. And he established another institute for crafts and light industries, and housed in each of these two institutes five hundred pupils, and guaranteed their growth during his lifetime and their continuation after his death — so he was thus providing for the upbringing and education of a thousand Italian children, and enabling them, once they graduated, to live honorably, benefiting themselves and benefiting others. Nor was he content with that; he restored the important historical monuments on that island, established there a library frequented by students of culture and knowledge, and then established there a cultural center, where the luminaries of culture, learning, and letters meet from time to time, to discuss matters of culture, learning, and letters that concern them.

Our gathering was one of these meetings, which it is hoped will continue and multiply, bound to no fixed subject and subject to no system except that of free, frank thought.

We met for six days, morning and evening, and we spoke and they spoke, and we were not lacking in frankness of speech, nor were they lacking in the courage to acknowledge the truth once the truth became clear to them, and it was necessary, before anything else, that we agree on what Western civilization is, and what it can be! For I know of no Western civilization that differs in its essence from Islamic civilization; I know only that there is a single civilization that flourished around the Mediterranean, that Egypt preceded all others to its foundations, that Greece endowed it with strength, vigor, and fruitfulness, and that Greece received it in turn from the Romans; it then spread afterward through the west and east of the Mediterranean, and through its north and south, and became Christian when it came to know Christianity, and became Muslim when it came to know Islam; it carried into itself the culture of the ancient nations and whatever of these nations' heritage suited it,

digested it, assimilated it, and made it a part of itself; it revived nations that had submitted to the authority of Islam, and the Muslims themselves then carried it to the west of Europe, bringing about there a fruitful renaissance that would never have come about had the books of the Muslims on philosophy, the arts, and the sciences not been translated into Latin, which was the language of culture in the west of Europe.

And it is this same civilization with which the Europeans' contact intensified in their modern renaissance; they took it up again from its Greek and Latin foundations, fanned its embers back to life, and gave to it, as it had given to them, everything it had attained and everything they attained, of advancement and flourishing.

Islamic civilization and Western civilization are thus one in their foundations, their essence, and their nature; but the circumstances of history decreed that the Muslims should grow dormant, and granted the Westerners the chance to become active, so that western Europe advanced and the Islamic East fell behind. It is not correct, then, to say that there are two civilizations, one Islamic and the other Western European.

And to say that there is a dispute between Islam and Western civilization requires a great deal of precision. For Islam does not dispute with Western civilization in itself, since it is Islam's own civilization; rather, it disputes with a faction among the Westerners who have departed from the foundations of their own civilization, and who have disobeyed what it commands and urges upon them, filling the earth with evil and wrongdoing, dividing people who ought rightly to have been united, and setting themselves above others on earth — and true civilization, whether Eastern or Western, does not love domination, but rather detests it most intensely, and establishes equality among people in everything in which equality is possible, for no reason but that they share in a common humanity, enter life by one and the same manner, and leave it by one and the same manner, and ought to live between these two moments close to one another and in solidarity, none dominating another, none oppressing, degrading, or humiliating another.

And it is not correct to describe Western civilization as a civilization distinguished in its essence from the civilization of the Islamic East; for the essence of the two civilizations is one, and the difference of religion between Muslims and Christians changes nothing of the nature of the

civilization, because the higher ideals to which Islam calls and to which Christianity calls are one in their essence: both religions call to belief in a single God with no partner, both command good and forbid wrong, and both impose justice and equality among people.

Nor is it correct to say that Western civilization is distinguished by the materialism that has spread within it since the advancement of science; for materialism is not confined to Western civilization — it has appeared in the Islamic world too, and the Muslims have rejected it, just as the Christians reject it, and a group of Western Christian scholars and philosophers have devoted themselves to refuting it and have waged war against it.

And if all of this is true — and it is true beyond doubt — then the dispute existing between the Islamic East and the Christian West is not a dispute between one civilization and another, nor a dispute between one religion and another; it is rather a dispute between the love of justice and excess in oppression, between the love of equality and extremism in division, and the preference for domination and privilege. And nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the fact that the difference of religion has not prevented Christians and non-Christians from living honorably among Muslims, and from taking part in Islamic civilization as active, positive participants, not as passive, subjugated ones; they condemn the tyranny of the West just as the Muslims condemn it, they aspire to freedom, justice, and dignity just as the Muslims aspire to them, and they struggle for these rights just as the Muslims struggle for them.

Nor is anything more demonstrative of this than the fact that the sincere adherents of Christianity, those genuinely faithful to it among the people of the West, condemn the colonialism in which their politicians and leaders have become embroiled, and the oppression, injustice, and aggression that arise from it, and the hatred, rancor, and enmity that it spreads among people.

And nothing, in the end, demonstrates this more than the fact that the Muslims are striving to make up for what they have missed, seeking out Western civilization, acquiring it, taking part in it, adopting its means, settling it in their own countries, and taking care that their share of it be equal to the share of the Westerners; for civilization is not mere

talk — it is science, art, philosophy, and work. The Muslims study the sciences, arts, and philosophy of the West, and add to them when the opportunity allows, and reconcile them with their own temperaments, natures, morals, customs, and inherited traditions, finding no harm in this, nor do those who would blame them for it have any right to blame them, for they are doing now exactly what the Westerners did with the civilization of the Muslims in the Middle Ages.

Our Italian colleagues were unable to deny this or dispute it; rather, they acknowledged it and rejoiced in it, and the dialogue thereafter proceeded upon a firm foundation, and we set about searching with them for the causes of the dispute between Islam and the West, and we found no difficulty, nor did we need to exert any effort in identifying these causes, for they are too plain to require research or effort — they all come down, in the end, to a single cause: colonialism, which has entangled the Westerners in many sins, entangled them in injustice; they exploited the homelands of others without having any right to exploit them, claimed for themselves the fruits produced by these homelands to the exclusion of their own people, subjugated the people of these homelands by brute force so as to secure their fruits for themselves, even while the people of these homelands were denied the enjoyment of them, and became embroiled in killing and the shedding of blood beyond reckoning, for no reason but their desire to compel these people, by insistence, to remain slaves who toil and labor so that the Westerners might enjoy comfort and luxury.

One of our Italian colleagues said: you go to excess against the West when you recount its evils and forget the good it has bestowed upon you, for it has bestowed upon you its science, its arts, its letters, its philosophy, and its material production in all its variety, and it has utterly transformed your life, easing it after it had been hard, softening it after it had been harsh and rough. I could not help but respond to this colleague with a certain sharpness, in a remark that soon settled in the minds of his companions, so that they would throw it back at me every time we found ourselves together in some gathering, sometimes seriously, sometimes in jest ... I said: you do not bestow the fruits of your civilization upon us — we take them from you by force, and we take them from you against your will; for we purchase them with money, and we pay you dearly for their price, and you will never be able to keep them from us, because you cannot prevent us from reading your books and your newspapers, or from

attending your universities and your institutes; indeed, you compete among yourselves to sell us your civilization. You used to imagine that this would subject us to your authority, but you have since come to realize that it tempts us instead to rebel against you and to free ourselves from your oppression and your tyranny; and look, if you wish, at what has happened in Egypt, and what is happening in North Africa, and what is happening in all the Islamic lands — indeed, in every country you have tried to colonize.

And the dialogue between us proceeded in this manner for six days, growing fierce at times, until it reached the utmost pitch of fierceness, and growing gentle at other times, until it settled into affection and clarity, and it concluded, on the last day, in the best way a dialogue can conclude: it concluded on the principle that people are brothers so long as they build their lives upon love, justice, and cooperation in righteousness and piety, and enemies if they build their lives upon self-interest, tyranny, and oppression; and on the principle that the whole good lies in renewing this meeting between Muslims and Westerners, so that they might try, through research and study, to reach a common word. And I do not forget, when that venerable Shaykh who presided over our sessions — one of the great Italian jurists — came, laughing, to see me off on the deck of the ship, reminding me of that remark of mine which had settled in his mind: that we do not give you our civilization, but that we take it from you by force.

And I do not know why such gatherings take place in Europe, while nothing of the kind takes place in the Arab East, and in Egypt especially; but that is a discussion for another time.