A Sense of the Sacred: Building Bridges Between Islam and the West

by His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales[1]

I hesitated a long time before suggesting that it might be worth trying to use this occasion to hold a seminar on a Sense of the Sacred and its relevance to the problem of understanding between the Islamic and Western worlds. I am only too aware that this is not a typical or, for some people, an easy or comfortable way of looking at what are often seen as intensely practical issues. But I am encouraged by the fact that, whenever I have summoned up my courage to speak about this subject in the past, even to groups of hard-headed, practical people like international financiers or property developers, it seems always to have struck an extraordinary chord, and captured a remarkable degree of attention. My belief is that in each one of us there is a distant echo of the sense of the sacred. but that the majority of us are terrified to admit its existence for fear of ridicule and abuse. This fear of ridicule, even to the extent of mentioning the name of God, is a classic indication of the loss of meaning in so-called Western civilization.

I start from the belief that Islamic civilization at its best, like many of the religions of the East—Judaism, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism—has an important message for the West in the way it has retained a more integrated and integral view of the sanctity of the world around us. I feel that we in the West could be helped to rediscover those roots of our own understanding by an appreciation of the Islamic tradition's deep respect for the timeless traditions of the natural order. I believe that process could help in the task of bringing our two faiths closer together. It could also help us in the West to rethink, and for the better, our practical stewardship of man and his environment in fields like healthcare, the natural environment and agriculture, as well as in architecture and urban planning. I want very briefly to explain why this might be so.

Modern materialism in my humble opinion is unbalanced and increasingly damaging in its long-term consequences. Yet nearly all the great religions of the world have held an integral view of the sanctity of the world. The Christian message with, for example, its deeply mystical and symbolic doctrine of the Incarnation, has been traditionally a message of the unity of the worlds of spirit and matter, and of God's manifestation in this world and in mankind. But during the last three centuries, in the Western world at least, a dangerous division has come into being in the way we perceive the world around us. Science has tried to assume a monopoly—even a tyranny—over our understanding. Religion and science have become separated, with the result, as William Wordsworth said, "Little we see in nature that is ours". Science has attempted to take over the natural world from God, with the result that it has fragmented the cosmos and relegated

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[1]Editorial Note: In December 1996, H.R.H. The Prince of Wales made a speech at the Wilton Park Seminar on the Sense of the Sacred. The text of his speech was subsequently published in the journal, Sophia (Volume 3, Number 1; Summer 1997). This revised version of the text (with a specially-written additional paragraph) is printed in Sacred Web with the express permission of the author.

the sacred to a separate, and secondary, compartment of our understanding, divorced from the practical day-to-day existence.

We are only now beginning to gauge the disastrous results of this outlook. We in the Western world seem to have lost a sense of the wholeness of our environment, and of our immense and inalienable responsibility to the whole of creation. This has led to an increasing failure to appreciate or understand tradition, and the wisdom of our forebears accumulated over the centuries. Indeed, tradition is positively discriminated against—as if it was some socially unacceptable disease.

In my view, a more holistic approach is needed in our contemporary world. Science has done the inestimable service of showing us a world much more complex than we ever imagined. But in its modern, materialist, one-dimensional form, it cannot explain everything. God is not merely the ultimate Newtonian mathematician or the mechanistic clockmaker. Francis Bacon said that God will not produce miracles to convince those who cannot see the miracle of a growing blade of grass or falling rain. As science and technology have become increasingly separated from ethical, moral and sacred considerations, so have the implications of such a separation become more sombre and horrifying—as we see, for example, in genetic manipulation, or in the consequences of the kind of (scientific) arrogance so blatant in the scandal of BSE.

I believe there is a growing sense of the danger of these materialist presumptions in our increasingly alienated and dissatisfied world. Some may say that the tide is, perhaps, beginning to turn, but I fear there are still large herds of conventional sacred cows blocking the path... Some scientists are slowly coming to realize the awe-inspiring complexity and mystery of the universe. But there remains a need to rediscover the bridge between what the great faiths of the world have recognized as our inner and our outer worlds, our physical and our spiritual nature. That bridge is the expression of our humanity. It fulfils this role through the medium of traditional knowledge and art, which have civilized mankind and without which civilization could not long be maintained. After centuries of neglect and cynicism, the transcendental wisdom of the great religious traditions, including the Judaeo-Christian and the Islamic, and the metaphysics of the Platonic tradition, which was such an important inspiration for Western philosophical and spiritual ideas, is finally being rediscovered.

I have always felt that tradition is not a man-made element in our lives, but a God-given intuition of natural rhythms, of the fundamental harmony which emerges from the union of those paradoxical opposites which exist in every aspect of Nature. Tradition reflects the timeless order of the cosmos, and anchors us into an awareness of the great mysteries of the universe so that, as Blake put it, we can see the whole universe in an atom and eternity in a moment. That is why I believe Man is so much more than just a biological phenomenon resting on what we now seem to define as "the bottom line" of the great balance sheet of life, according to which art and culture are seen increasingly as optional extras in life. This view is so contrary, for example, to the outlook of the Muslim craftsman or artist, which was never concerned with display for its own sake, nor with progressing ever forward in his own ingenuity, but was content to submit a man's craft to God. That outlook reflects, I believe, the memorable passage in the Qur'an: "Whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God, and God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing". While appreciating that this essential innocence has been destroyed, and destroyed everywhere, I nevertheless believe that the survival of civilized values, as we have inherited them from our ancestors, depends on the corresponding survival in our hearts of that profound sense of the sacred and the spiritual.

Traditional religions, with their integral view of the universe, can help us in an important way to rediscover the importance of the integration of the secular and the sacred - as I tried to argue in my speech in Oxford in 1993 on Islam and the West. The danger of ignoring this essential aspect of our existence is not just spiritual or intellectual. It also lies at the heart of that great divide between the Islamic and Western worlds over the place of materialism in our lives. In those instances where Islam chooses to reject Western materialism, this is not, in my view, only a political affectation or the result of envy or a sense of inferiority. Quite the opposite. And the danger that the gulf between the worlds of Islam and the other major Eastern religions on the one hand, and the West on the other, will grow ever wider and more unbridgeable is real, unless we can explore together practical ways of integrating the sacred and the secular in both cultures in order to provide a true inspiration for the next century.

For it seems to me that it is the over-emphasis in the Western model of civilization on scientific materialism to the almost total exclusion of the sanctity of the inner world—which is, in turn, reflected in the expression of outer values—that helps to cause the growing gulf between East and West. The unbalanced nature of Globalization itself will likely cause ever greater fault lines in the relationship unless there is a realization in the West that some room has to be left for those spiritual and sacred elements that define what is truly cultural, and indeed religious (and religion means, literally, being bound to God), in man's inner and outer relationship with a world which is both visible and yet invisible.

This rediscovery of an integrated view of the sacred could also help us in areas of important practical activity. In medicine, whatever some scientists might say, the rupture between religion and science, between the material world and a sense of the sacred, has too often led to a blinkered approach to healthcare, and to a failure to understand the wholeness and the manifest mystery of the healing process. Hospitals need to be conceived and, above all, designed to reflect the wholeness of healing if they are to help the process of recovery in a more complete way. Modern medicine remains too often a one-dimensional approach to illness which, however sophisticated and miraculous in some of its achievements, cannot of itself understand more than a fraction of what there is to know, and can still be enriched and enlightened by more traditional approaches. There are, I am glad to say, beacons of light seeking to integrate the modern and traditional approaches which I have come across over the years, such as the Marylebone Health Centre in London, or the Bristol Cancer Help Centre.

Our environment has suffered beyond our worst nightmares, in part because of a one-sided approach to economic development which, until very recently, failed to take account of the inter-relatedness of creation. Little thought was given to the importance of finding that "sustainable" balance which worked within the grain of Nature and understood the vital necessity of setting and respecting limits. This, for example, is why protection of our environment is a relatively recent concern; and why organic and sustainable farming are so important if we are to use the land in a way which will safeguard its ability to nourish future generations.

A third area in which this separation of the material and spiritual has had dramatic consequences is architecture. I believe this separation lies at the heart of the failure of so much modern architecture to understand the essential spiritual quality and the traditional principles that reflect a cosmic harmony, from which come buildings with which people feel comfortable and in which they want to live. That is why I started my own small Institute of Architecture some five years ago. Titus Burckhardt wrote: “It is the nature of art to rejoice the soul, but not every art

possesses a spiritual dimension". We see this spirituality in traditional Christian architecture which, incidentally, was also inspired by a far more profound symbolic awareness than could ever be imagined by those who categorize such architecture as a question of mere style. This spiritual dimension also infuses the intricate geometric and arabesque patterns of Islamic art and architecture, which are ultimately a manifestation of Divine Unity, which in turn is the central message of the Qur'an. The Prophet Mohammed himself is believed to have said: "God is Beautiful and He loves beauty".

Look also at urban planning. The great historian, Ibn Khaldun, understood that the intimate relationship between city life and spiritual tranquility was an essential basis for civilization. Can we ever again return to such harmony in our cities? As civilizations decay, so do the crafts, as Ibn Khaldun again wrote.

All these principles come down in the end to a battle for preserving sacred values. It is a battle to restore an understanding of the spiritual integrity of our lives, and for reintegrating what the modern world has fragmented. Islamic culture in its traditional form has striven to preserve this integrated spiritual view of the world in a way we have not seen fit to do in recent generations in the West. There is much we can share with the Islamic world view in this respect, and much in that world view which can help us to understand the shared and timeless elements in our two faiths. In that common endeavor both our modern societies, Islamic and Western, can learn afresh the traditional views of life common to our religions, as well as the sacred responsibilities we have for the care and stewardship of the world around us.

In my Oxford speech in 1993 I argued for a much greater effort to be made to encourage understanding between the Islamic and Western worlds. My firm belief in the importance of that process has not changed. The harm that will be done to both cultures if ignorance and prejudice persist - or grow - will be incalculable. There are many ways in which this understanding and appreciation can be built. But even if we begin with a simple understanding of the sacred, which permeates every aspect of our world, there is the potential for establishing new and valuable links between Islamic civilization and the West. Perhaps, for instance, we could begin by having more Muslim teachers in British schools, or by encouraging exchanges of teachers. Everywhere in the world people are seemingly wanting to learn English. But in the West, in turn, we need to be taught by Islamic teachers how to learn once again with our hearts, as well as our heads... The approaching Millennium may be the ideal catalyst for helping to explore and stimulate these links, and I hope we shall not ignore the opportunity this gives us to rediscover the spiritual underpinning of our entire existence. For myself, I am convinced that we cannot afford, for the health and sustainability of a civilized existence, any longer to ignore these timeless features of our world. A sense of the sacred can, I believe, help provide the basis for developing a new relationship of understanding which can only enhance the relations between our two faiths—and indeed between all faiths—for the benefit of our children and future generations.