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In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Submitters Perspective

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Islam and the West

We must distinguish between systems of justice administered with integrity, and systems of justice as we may see them practiced which have been deformed for political reasons into something no longer Islamic. We should also distinguish Islam from the customs of some Islamic states.

Prince Charles

[Editor's note: It is important to know the views of people in the West on Islam, especially the views of those who can make a difference in world politics. The following are excerpts from the speech of Prince Charles of Great Britain, the Prince of Wales, delivered at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, on the occasion of his visit to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, on 17th October, 1993. We found his speech quite interesting. We hope you do too.]

Ladies and gentlemen, it was suggested to me when I first began to consider the subject of this lecture, that I should take comfort from the Arab proverb, "In every head there is some wisdom." I confess that I have few qualifications as a scholar to justify my presence here, in this theatre, where so many people much more learned than I have preached and generally advanced the sum of human knowledge....

Given all the reservations I have about venturing into a complex and controversial field, you may well ask why I am here in this marvelous Wren building talking to you on the subject of Islam and the West. The reason is, ladies and gentlemen, that I believe wholeheartedly that the links between these two worlds matter more today than ever before, because the degree of misunderstanding between the Islamic and Western worlds remains dangerously high, and because the need for

the two to live and work together in our increasingly interdependent world has never been greater. At the same time I am only too well aware of the minefields which lie across the path of the inexperienced traveler who is bent on exploring this difficult route. Some of what I shall say will undoubtedly provoke disagreement, criticism, misunderstanding and probably worse. But perhaps, when all is said and done, it is worth recalling another Arab proverb: "What comes from the lips reaches the ears. What comes from the heart reaches the heart."

The depressing fact is that, despite the advances in technology and mass communications of the second half of the 20th century, despite mass travel, the intermingling of races, the ever growing reduction—or so we believe—of the mysteries of our world, misunderstandings between Islam and the West continue. Indeed, they may be growing.... Islam is all around us. And yet distrust, even fear, persist. In the post-Cold War world of the 1990's, the prospects for peace should be greater than at any time in this century. In the Middle East, the remarkable and encouraging events of recent weeks have created new hope for an end to an issue which has divided the world and been so dramatic a source of violence and hatred. But the dangers have not disappeared. In the Muslim world, we are seeing the unique

way of life of the Marsh Arabs of Southern Iraq, thousands of years old, being systematically devastated and destroyed.... Elsewhere the violence and hatred are more intractable and deep-seated, as we go on seeing everyday to our horror in the wretched suffering of peoples across the world—in the former Yugoslavia, in Somalia, Angola, Sudan, in so many of the former Soviet Republics. In Yugoslavia the terrible sufferings of the Bosnian Muslims, alongside that of other communities in that cruel war, help keep alive many of the fears and the prejudices which our two worlds retain of each other. Conflict, of course, comes about because of the misuse of power and the clash of ideals, not to mention the inflammatory activities of unscrupulous and bigoted leaders. But it also arises, tragically, from an inability to understand, and from the powerful emotions which out of misunderstanding lead to distrust and fear. Ladies and gentlemen, we must not slide into a new era of danger and division because governments and peoples, communities and religions, cannot live together in peace in a shrinking world.

...The corollary of how we in the West see our history has so often been to regard Islam as a threat—in medieval times as a

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Scriptural Quotes

Surely, some followers of the previous scriptures do believe in God, and in what was revealed to you, and in what was revealed to them. They reverence God, and they never trade away God's revelations for a cheap price. These will receive their recompense from their Lord. God is the most efficient in reckoning. [Quran 3:199]

The Heavens are telling the glory of God; they are a marvelous display of His craftsmanship. Day and night they keep on telling about God. Without a sound or word, silent in the skies, their message reaches out to all the world. The sun lives in the heavens where God placed it and moves out across the skies as radiant as a bridegroom going to his wedding, or as joyous as an athlete looking forward to a race! The sun crosses the heavens from end to end, and nothing can hide from its heat.

God's laws are perfect. They protect us, make us wise, and give us joy and light. God's laws are pure, eternal, just. They are more desirable than gold. They are sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb. For they warn us away from harm and give success to those who obey them.

But how can I ever know what sins are lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults. And keep me from deliberate wrongs; help me to stop doing them. Only then can I be free of guilt and innocent of some great crime.

May my spoken words and unspoken thoughts be pleasing even to you, O Lord my Rock and my Redeemer. [Psalms 19]

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Islam and the West *continued*

trusteeship of the vital sacramental and spiritual character of the world about us is surely something important we can learn from Islam. I am quite sure some will instantly accuse me, as they usually do, of living in the past, of refusing to come to terms with reality and modern life. On the contrary, ladies and gentlemen, what I am appealing for is a wider, deeper, more careful understanding of our worlds; for a metaphysical as well as material dimension to our lives, in order to recover the balance we have abandoned, the absence of which, I believe, will prove disastrous in the long term. In the ways of thought found in Islam and other religions can help us in that search, then there are things for us to learn from this system of belief which I suggest we ignore at our peril.

...Before I go, I cannot put to you strongly enough the importance of the issues which I have tried to touch so imperfectly. These two worlds, the Islamic and the Western, are at something of a crossroads in their relations. We must not let them stand apart. I do not accept the argument that they are on course to clash in a new era of antagonism. I am utterly convinced that our two worlds have much to offer each other. We have much to do together. I am delighted that the dialogue has begun, both in Britain and elsewhere. But we shall need to work harder to understand each other, to drain out any poison between us, and to lay the ghost of suspicion and fear. The further down that road we can travel, the better the world that we shall create for our children and for future generations.

Islam and the West *continued*

military conqueror, and in more modern times as a source of intolerance, extremism and terrorism.... But even now our common attitude to Islam suffers because the way we understand it has been hijacked by the extreme and the superficial. To many of us in the West, Islam is seen in terms of the tragic civil war in Lebanon, the killings and bombings perpetrated by extremist groups in the Middle East, and by what is commonly referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism." Our judgment of Islam has been grossly distorted by taking the extremes to be the norm. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a serious mistake. It is like judging the quality of life in Britain by the existence of murder and rape, child abuse and drug addiction. The extremes exist, and they must be dealt with. But when used as a basis to judge a society, they lead to distortion and unfairness.

For example, people in this country frequently argue that the *Sharia* law of the Islamic world is cruel, barbaric and unjust. Our newspapers, above all, love to peddle those unthinking prejudices. The truth is, of course, different and always more complex. My own understanding is that extremes, like the cutting off of hands, are rarely practiced. The guiding principle and spirit of Islamic law, taken straight from the Qur'an, should be those of equity and compassion. We need to study its actual application before we make judgments. We must distinguish between systems of justice administered with integrity, and systems of justice as we may see them practiced which have been deformed for political reasons into something no longer Islamic. We must bear in mind the sharp debate taking place in the Islamic world itself about the extent of the universality or timelessness of *Sharia* law, and the degree to which the application of that law is continually changing and evolving.

We should also distinguish Islam from the customs of some Islamic states. Another obvious Western prejudice is to judge the position of women in Islamic society by the extreme cases. Yet Islam is not a monolith and the picture is not simple. Remember, if you will, that Islamic countries like Turkey, Egypt and Syria gave women the vote as early as Europe did its women—and much earlier than in

Switzerland! In those countries women have long enjoyed equal pay, and the opportunity to play a full working role in their societies. The rights of Muslim women to property and inheritance, to some protection if divorced, and to the conducting of business, were rights prescribed by the Qur'an twelve hundred (fourteen hundred, *ed.*) years ago, even if they were not everywhere translated into practice. In Britain at least, some of these rights were novel even to my grandmother's generation! Benazir Bhutto and Begum Khaleda Zia became prime ministers in their own traditional societies when Britain had for the first time ever in its history elected a female prime minister. That, I think, does not smack of a medieval society. Women are not automatically second-class citizens because they live in Islamic countries. We cannot judge the position of women in Islam aright if we take the most conserva-

We should not confuse the modesty of dress prescribed by the Qur'an for men as well as women with the outward forms of secular custom or social status which have their origins elsewhere.

tive Islamic states as representative of the whole. For example, the veiling of women is not all universal across the Islamic world. Indeed, I was intrigued to learn that the custom of wearing the veil owed much to Byzantine and Sassanian traditions, nothing to the Prophet of Islam. Some Muslim women never adopted the veil, others have discarded it, others—particularly the younger generation—have more recently chosen to wear the veil or the headscarf as a personal statement of their Muslim identity. But we should not confuse the modesty of dress prescribed by the Qur'an for men as well as women with the outward forms of secular custom or social status which have their origins elsewhere.

...Medieval Islam was a religion of remarkable tolerance for its time, allowing Jews and Christians the right to practice their inherited beliefs, and setting an example which was not, unfortunately, copied for many centuries in the West. The

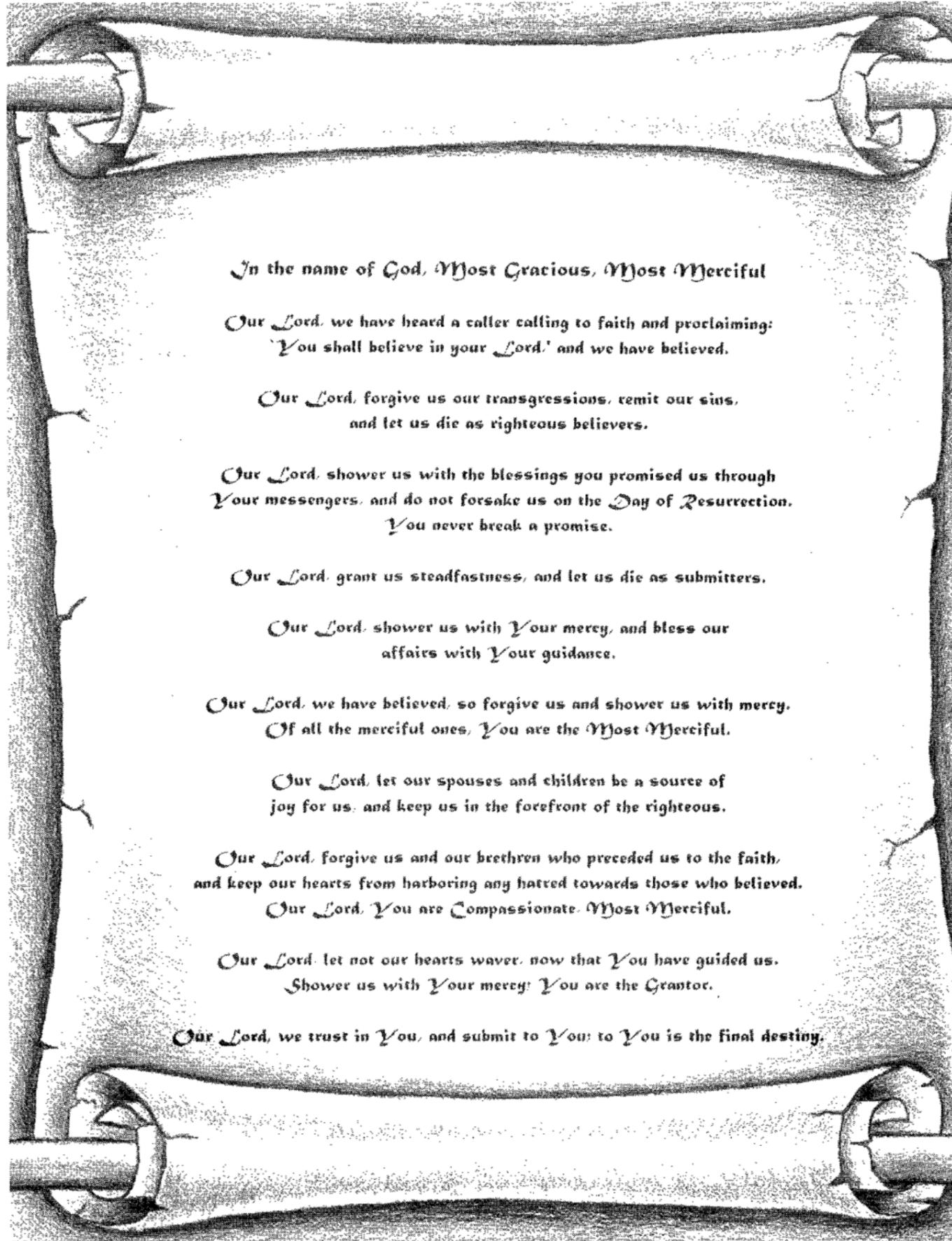
surprise, ladies and gentlemen, is the extent to which Islam has been a part of Europe for so long, first in Spain, then in the Balkans, and the extent to which it has contributed so much towards the civilization which we all too often think of, wrongly, as entirely Western. Islam is part of our past and our present, in all fields of human endeavor. It has helped to create modern Europe. It is part of our own inheritance, not a thing apart.

More than this, Islam can teach us today a way of understanding and living in the world which Christianity itself is poorer for having lost. At the heart of Islam is its preservation of an integral view of the Universe. Islam—like Buddhism and Hinduism—refuses to separate man and nature, religion and science, mind and matter, and has prepared a metaphysical and unified view of ourselves and the world around us. At the core of Christianity there still lies an integral view of the sanctity of the world, and a clear sense of trusteeship and responsibility given to us for our natural surroundings. In the words of that marvelous seventeenth century poet and hymn writer, George Herbert:

"A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through its pass,
And then the heaven espy."

But the West gradually lost this integrated vision of the world with Copernicus and Descartes and the coming of the scientific revolution. A comprehensive philosophy of nature is no longer part of our everyday beliefs. I cannot help feeling that, if we could now only rediscover that earlier, all-embracing approach to the world around us, to see and understand its deeper meaning, we could begin to get away from the increasing tendency in the West to live in the surface of our surroundings, where we study our world in order to manipulate and dominate it, turning harmony and beauty into disequilibrium and chaos. It is a sad fact, I believe, that in so many ways the external world we have created in the last few hundred years has come to reflect our own divided and confused inner state. Western civilization has become increasingly acquisitive and exploitative in defiance of our environmental responsibilities. This crucial sense of oneness and

continued on the last page



In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

*Our Lord, we have heard a caller calling to faith and proclaiming:
'You shall believe in your Lord,' and we have believed.*

*Our Lord, forgive us our transgressions, remit our sins,
and let us die as righteous believers.*

*Our Lord, shower us with the blessings you promised us through
Your messengers, and do not forsake us on the Day of Resurrection.
You never break a promise.*

Our Lord, grant us steadfastness, and let us die as submitters.

*Our Lord, shower us with Your mercy, and bless our
affairs with Your guidance.*

*Our Lord, we have believed, so forgive us and shower us with mercy.
Of all the merciful ones, You are the Most Merciful.*

*Our Lord, let our spouses and children be a source of
joy for us, and keep us in the forefront of the righteous.*

*Our Lord, forgive us and our brethren who preceded us to the faith,
and keep our hearts from harboring any hatred towards those who believed.*

Our Lord, You are Compassionate, Most Merciful.

*Our Lord, let not our hearts waver, now that You have guided us.
Shower us with Your mercy; You are the Grantor.*

Our Lord, we trust in You, and submit to You; to You is the final destiny.