Statement of Alexandria:
Report and reflections on a conference of the
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Introduction

This Convention, under the theme "Contribution of Religions in Serving Mankind", was a major international conference within the Islamic world to which I had been invited to attend and to present a paper. I submitted "The Challenge of Islam: A Western-Pacific Perspective" and this was issued as part of the pre-published Convention Proceedings. There were over 400 invited participants from more than 100 nations present, together with representatives from various international Islamic organisations and foundations such as the Muslim World League, the Organisation of Islamic Countries, and so on. Of the participants there were many who were not themselves Muslims but, like myself, are sympathetic scholars, or else significant religious dignitaries. For example, both a Cardinal and a Bishop from the Vatican were in attendance.

For the most part it seemed delegations comprised a political figure-head, such as an Emir or a Parliamentarian, together with a retinue of advisers, inclusive of a scholar or two. I was the sole representative from New Zealand. My return travel and all accommodation costs at the convention were generously met by the Egyptian authorities.

Held under the auspices of President Hosni Mubarak, the convention was organised by the Egyptian Ministry of Waqfs (Religious Endowments) and Al Azhar University, Cairo. The invitation, relayed to me by the Egyptian embassy in Canberra, was issued over the names of Dr Muhammad Aly Mahgoub, Minister of Waqfs and Head of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs; and His Eminence The Grand Imam, Sheikh Gad Al-Haque Aly Gad Al-Haque, the Rector of Al-Azhar and Chairman of the Convention. The fact I was invited was due to my being nominated by Muslim authorities in New Zealand in consultation with the Egyptian Embassy in Canberra. I was issued with a letter of introduction from the President of the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand, Imam Ali, together with some FIANZ brochures and two copies of the annual reports of FIANZ which I was able to convey to appropriate authorities at the Convention.

Briefly, the Convention followed a pattern of plenary sessions where presenters of papers spoke briefly to their subject-matter, together with a series of subsidiary sessions at which convention delegates met in four committees to discuss the various presentations under the general sub-themes of Cultural, Social, Economic and News Media

Aspects. Opening speeches included addresses from both Muslim and non-Muslim dignitaries. On the Wednesday evening there was a celebration to mark the birthday of Muhammad, the 'Holy Prophet' of Islam, held in the Large Hall of the Alexandria Library. This took the form of a rally at which presentations were made in respect of high achievers in religious education endeavours, and a key-note address was delivered by the Egyptian President. At the closing session on the final day the Convention Statement, as informed by the deliberations of the committees, was delivered. I have since received an English copy of this issued under the title *Statement of Alexandria.*

In this paper I wish simply to say a few more words about my own experience and impressions of the Convention itself, and then critically review the recommendations that form the substance of the statement. The tenor of these recommendations is notable for its moderation and its call to the Islamic *Ummah* to work together more harmoniously in the resistance of terrorism and the promotion of peace and good world citizenship. It was clear, in the context of my attendance at the Convention, that the lead of the Egyptians had considerable bearing upon the Statement that was issued.

It is always a unique and salutary experience to find oneself in a different cultural and linguistic context. The language of the Convention was, of course, Arabic, although there was simultaneous translation into both English and French provided for in the Opening and General sessions. Whilst, therefore, I could follow the bulk of the formal proceedings, much else of my experience - including the evening celebration - was a matter of sensing the atmosphere of the occasion and gleaning what I could from those who were able to interpret. I also made very valuable contacts with scholars and religious leaders from Uruguay to the Ukraine, including a significant contact with the Vatican.

So far as attending the Convention itself was concerned, I had, quite literally, a front-row seat observing a significant international Islamic conference. My own direct contribution was limited to the inclusion of my paper in the published proceedings: pressure of time, and my absence for the second day due to ill-health, meant I never had an opportunity to address the Convention directly. Nonetheless, the overall experience of my brief time in Egypt afforded me a observation upon the contemporary world of Islam in general; upon the Arab and Middle East world more specifically; and upon the Egyptian Islamic world in particular.

The Statement of Alexandria: a critical review

Issued under the name of The Arab Republic of Egypt, The Holy Al Azhar, Ministry of Waqfs, and The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the Statement and its recommendations as promulgated by the Convention is a significant contemporary Islamic document.

Preamble & Foreword

Twenty-nine pages in length, the Statement commences with a 5 page preamble setting the scene and context for the Recommendations. It is clear that this Council and Convention seeks to set an Islamic agenda, and an Islamic

programme, in response to the contemporary needs of society and the world at large. Furthermore, it seeks to do this within a wider framework of mutual tolerance towards, and co-operation with, all "Divine Religions" and societies who seek justice and promote human rights. In particular, concern for the rights of minority groups and concern that wealthy nations were not doing enough to redress the imbalance of resources with poor nations are noted. The role of the family, and the importance of the role of women, were highlighted. The need for governmental agencies and religious foundations, particularly within the Islamic world was also stressed.

It is useful, when examining the documentary product of a religious community, to identify and review the principles and values that are openly acknowledged. In this case the Preamble asserts:

The current world lives a new epoch caused by a fierce scientific material revolution shaking the very conceptions, understandings and opinions, causing a total change and up-heaval in human relations ...[1]

This has led, the statement avers, to the

... spread of violence, crime, contamination of the environment, its destruction as well as the violation of human rights and spread of various kinds of choas(sic) in the(sic) social relations.[2]

Juxtaposed with this view of the negative impact of the modern world upon the social fabric was a comment noting disturbance also to the "inner equilibrium" of individuals.

A second grounding principle is found in the statement that the "Divine Religions" should not hide the "unity of the noble principles which came by The Divine Revelation and Allah's prophets" but rather that this unity requires "the adherents of these religions to double their efforts" in their facing up to all those things which "diminish the role of religions in the life of people and its impact on their behaviour"[3].

It is clear that the promulgators of this document begin with a jaundiced view of the modern epoch and implicitly contrast scientific materialism with the religious worldview. Indeed, religion is posited, in effect, as the antidote to the poisons of modern life. And so it is stressed that religions need to work together: or, more particularly, those religions which, qua 'Divine', are deemed to be from a common source, or of a common ilk such that it makes sense to call upon them to manifest a unity of purpose and endeavour. The Preamble goes on to identify a series of 'facts' or values "propagated by all Heavenly Religions", such as tolerance, justice, and respect of the rights of others; it eschews fanaticism and violence; it promotes the necessity of mutual and active co-operation.

But the concern is not just for the greater social good as such. Rather, the grounding concern with religion *per se* comes through: what is required, the Statement asserts, is not "mere discussions aimed at the abolishing of misapprehension ... but fruitful co-operation without delay for religion to regain and strengthen its role in the direction and guidance of the human course". It seems that, as a precondition to addressing specific issues, the place of religion itself is to be affirmed and reasserted. There is almost a tinge of apologetic coming through: in the face of an indifferent and secular society, religion must argue its case. This would certainly

be so in the Western context; it seems a little odd emerging from an Islamic one. Or is this more a matter, generally speaking, of *religious* leadership vying with *political* leadership for power-broking predominance within the Islamic setting? To be sure, whatever the political *sitz im leben* of a particular muslim community the common concern would seem to be that the religious dimension should dominate, for it is only in true religion that guidance and value is to be found, and only through its structures can order be ensured.

The presuppositions and values articulated in the Preamble are carried through into the Forward to the Recommendations. This Foreword, noting very real social and political difficulties facing the world at large, called for a revival of religious and ethical values and the furtherance of serious dialogue between religions in order better to promote co-operation for mutual good. Modern communications and information technology make the world a global village which, the document asserted, leads to the gap between human beings and values, both religious and ethical, "causing crumbling of society, the split and dissolving of families, spreaed(sic) of crime and violence, appearance and emergence of terrorism and the dominance of materialism over the noble valves(sic) of society"[4]. The adversarial context, religion vs modernity, or perhaps religion vs materialism, is thus elaborated. However, if the contextual reference seems gloomy, the proposed response is enlightened. Benefits from scientific progress can be accrued through "treading the path of exchanging opinions and ideas and knowledge and by establishing serious dialogue"[5]. By such

interchange co-operation between religions will be enhanced and a balance will be achieved between materialism and religious and ethical values. The future for humanity can be bright. But this future requires co-operative endeavour and mutual dialogical engagement. The positive values in response to a negative context seem clear enough. How do they match up to the outcomes as couched in the Recommendations?

Recommendations

Recommendations are grouped under four headings, referred to as "Pivots", and reflecting the divisions within the Convention's programme. Under the *Cultural* heading there are a number of recommendations concerning education (p10-12). Under the *Social* heading a number of sub-divisions ranged over issues such as charity and peace (p12-14), family relations (p14), and a substantial section on the theme of co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims (p15-24). Topics specifically touched on here included the principles of peaceful co-existence and addressing the application of these in respect of no less than eight particular issues. (See p 17ff). Human rights are promoted; terrorism is denounced; the way of war is decried and the way of peace is promoted. Under the *Economic* heading the main thrust is to urge greater co-operation within the Islamic world, and a stress was placed upon the social function of wealth in all the Divine Religions. The final *Information* heading called upon the media agencies to be clear and truthful when speaking about Islam and commended the various processes of dialogue where misinformation may be

corrected and disinformation counteracted. This section also stressed that the way of religion is not the way of violence[6]. Let us look at the substance of these four sections in a little more detail.

There are five recommendations listed under the Cultural heading. The first is a composite deliberation calling for renewed effort in applying "Divine Laws"[7] and promoting a revival of Islamic cultural legacy, including the use and spread of Arabic. This is the lead recommendation for which the next two speak of the educative tasks of dissemination and propagation and call for a review of educational programmes in Islamic countries such that a stronger emphasis may be given to Islamic cultural values, including religious (ie, Islamic) instruction. Thus the recommendations, as a whole, begin with a strong concern expressed for Islamic identity and the promulgation of Islamic values. Concern is expressed for Muslim minorities in non-Muslim lands in regards to the need for protection and enhancement of Islamic culture and identity. The statement here commends "certain European and American countries in their recognition of Islam ... allowing it to be taught to Muslim students ...(and for their provision of) material and moral assistance .. enabling them to obtain land and to build (mosques) and cultural centers."[8] The final recommendation in this section commends the support given from within the international Islamic community to Muslim communities of the former Soviet Union - and calls upon such countries to double their assistance "to strengthen cultural and religious ties binding them more to the Islamic world"[9]. Clearly the concern of the Culture Section is for the maintenance and enhancement of the links which hold the ummah together; the protection and promulgation of values and factors that forge Islamic identity.

The "Social Pivot" is given as the second heading under which three main issues are addressed. First, Social Charity and Peace, attracts a series of Quranic verses and one gospel quotation to provide a background for asserting common cause in promoting the stability of society and promulgating a general recommendation promoting social charity on a wide front, yet also specifying a review of the duty of *zakat* in respect of being an agency "of reciprocity through social and development funds"[10]. The second specific issue is that of family relations. This brief section simply asserts that the "structuring of family relations must be safeguarded against any interferences and factors in contradiction to religion as a whole" and appeals "to all nations to maintain family ties as organized and set out by Divine Legislations..."[11] This recommendation states no more than the bare minimum of a status quo position: the central value placed upon family is summarily affirmed. No more. No less.

The third sub-section, however, is lengthy and complex. It addresses issues of "co-existence between Muslims and Non-Muslims within and out of the Islamic Society"[12]. Here, it seems, we come to issues of significance and moment. The principle of co-existence between peoples of different civilisations, religions, etc, is asserted as foundational to Islamic civilisation as such. In particular the Quranic principles of freedom of belief[13] and equality as recognised in an Islamic legislative principle[14] are cited. Individual and public rights are affirmed and a plea is made that Muslims in non-Islamic

countries be allowed to apply Islamic Law to themselves. Consultation and democracy as the basis for rule is noted with the proviso that rules are subject to change through time[15]. Then, with reference to the issue of peaceful co-existence between societies, and the area of international relations, a range of contemporary 'hot-spots' are named and recommendations specific to them are issued. Here there is a decided change in the tone of language used. From general affirmation and broad appeal we move to impassioned demand and urgent request. Bosnia and Hercegovina are first up. The role of religion is acknowledged, but "the continuous and greedy expantionist(sic) dream and agenda of The Serbs" is identified as the prime problem. The recommendation that is forthcoming, together with some suggestions as to actions that could be taken, pulls no punches:

The Conference demands The Islamic Contact group Committee that emerged from The Organisation of Islamic Conference to scrutinise and look into the adoption of sufficient measures for the protection of Bosnian lands and the well-being and security of its people and achieving a just and lasting peace...[16]

The situation of Chechnya is also addressed, with an urgent appeal made to "international organizations and others to forward relief and human aid to The Chechnyan People"[17]. The Middle East and the Palestinian question comes in for a fair amount of comment, affirming of efforts already undertaken, referring to previous recommendations in respect of Palestinian self-rule and relevant UN resolutions[18], and issuing a strident appeal

...to all world states not to take any steps to transfer their embassies in Israel to Jerusalem ...

and it warns

... all International organizations and bodies of the necessity of compelling Israel in refraining from making any demographic changes in Jerusalem and the occupied lands in implementing the U.N. resolutions.[19]

On the other hand an appeal is made to the exercise of religious discretion and sensitivity over Jerusalem with a call to take "sufficient and appropriate procedures for the protection of these places ... whilst protecting the rights of its inhabitants"[20]. The Statement makes no bones about Muslim propriety:

Jerusalem remained since the entrance and triumph of Islam into it until the 1967 war, under the guardianship and care of Muslims who in turn provided security to adherents of other Divine religions in discharging their religious tenets in Jerusalem.[21]

Support for this position is claimed from a Vatican reference to the rights of all the "sons of Abraham" to enter the Holy City.

Iraq and Libya constitute together the fourth focus. The sufferings of the peoples of both countries is acknowledged and deplored and the governments of each are called to account. By the same token the international community is asked to lighten the burdens of economic blockade[22]. Jammu and Kashmir figure next where there is an expression of regret in respect to the destruction of holy and sacred sites and an urgent call made for the implementation of peaceful solutions[23].

The issue of weapons of mass destruction comes in as the sixth issue with an acknowledgment that all religions forbid the destruction of the environment, and promote instead compassion to all. Therefore an appeal is made for "the banning of all weapons of mass destruction" and countries possessing such arms are urged to destroy them[24]. This section leads into one on terrorism where, again, the antipathy of religion is noted, appropriate Quranic and gospel verses are cited, and all efforts to counter terrorism are encouraged. Finally, the issue of Human Rights is touched upon. In general there is a broad affirmation of the principle, and the link to religious sensibility is again made.

The third main heading, the "Economic Pivot" as it is called, ranges rather generally over two themes, viz, Islam and contemporary economic theories; and the social work function of many religions. Of the former an invitation is extended to Islamic countries "to work in co-operation"[25] and of the latter a stress is placed on the "social function and duty of wealth in all Divine religions"[26]. There is really no specific elaboration.

Finally we come to the heading "Information Pivot". This begins with an appeal

...to all Western Information Agencies to widen the scope for dialogue between different religions without suppressing the rights of one in favour of the other and to enable Muslim scholars of religion to project and present the correct Islamic doctrines and principles.[27]

Opportunities for dialogue were affirmed, and, in the context of the important role of the media, specific requests for clarity and accuracy in dissemination of facts were called for. An interesting and challenging recommendation was issued in respect of drawing attention to the danger of looking to Islam "as an enemy threatening Western Civilisation and being against its values"[28]. The perspectives of extremists who call for violence were declaimed. The call to Muslim writers, educators, etc, to be vigilant in correcting misinformation and countering disinformation, was clearly made. So it would seem the recommendations end where they began - the perennial concern of the ummah for its identity, integrity, and global image.

The Statement of Alexandria concludes with two paragraphs, the last of which, in referring to the establishment of a new permanent committee based in Cairo under the auspices of the Sheikh Al-Azhar, is worth quoting in full as it heralds an intention and development which is, for me, as exciting in its prospects as it is far-reaching in its vision.

This committee will consist of representatives of all Divine religions from different countries and its significance and function is to lay the foundation for a global dialogue network between these religions with the aim of extracting common values and principles ...and proximity in the instances of disagreement, thereby realising the strengthening of co-operation between the followers of these religions and bringing goodness welfare and prosperity to all of humanity.[29]

My hope is that the formation of just such a dialogue committee within the Islamic world is in fact enacted, and that its high ideals are given every encouragement and support. Of course it could be argued that the Statement is a somewhat predictable political document, given its careful articulation and at places

opaque use of language, and given the nature of the forum out of which it emerged. However, it does reflect and encapsulate a number of political and ideological perspectives which are highly contestable within the Islamic world today. One might have expected an attack of sorts upon America and/or Zionism. There was none. And this omission was the cause of only one dissenting voice when the Statement was presented at the close of the convention. The representative from Iran offered the only criticism of the Statement when he called for the inclusion of some such censure of Zionism and the role of America. He apparently felt that the Convention had gone soft, as it were, in this regard. He was politely heard and ignored. The predominant tone was clearly one of conciliation so far as the wider world was concerned, and conciliation, too, within the Islamic World. The prospect for further conciliatory engagement as a product of the work of an Islamic dialogue committee is indeed to be hoped for.

Notes

1. *Statement*, p1
2. ibid, p2
3. ibid
4. ibid, p7
5. ibid
6. cf. p28
7. It is worth noting that the phrase "Divine Laws" is used seemingly as an alternative to the usual term "Shari'ah". Perhaps the Statement was deliberately downplaying Islamist language and slogans in order not to be identified with the more right-wing agenda of the Islamic world, yet at the same time it would not wish to reject openly this dimension. At the same time, of course, such less Islamic-specific terms leaves open the impression of dialogical engagement if not universalism of some sort.
8. ibid p11
9. ibid p12
10. ibid p14
11. ibid
12. ibid p15ff.
13. Surah 2, verse 256 - compulsion is incompatible with religion.
14. *Statement* p15
15. ibid p16
16. ibid p17
17. ibid p18
18. "U.N. resolutions 242 and 338 and others"
19. *Statement* pp19-20
20. ibid p20
21. ibid
22. ibid p21
23. ibid p22
24. ibid
25. ibid p26
26. ibid p27
27. ibid
28. ibid p28
29. ibid p29