



## **Address to Seton Hall University: President Mohammad Khatami, Islamic Republic of Iran**

**November 9, 2001**

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

The situation of our world today has radically changed from the past. This transformation, which we have witnessed over less than two decades, has been brought about by the global system of communication. The verdict of technology has inter-related hitherto disparate spheres of culture and religions. In our world today, the issue of political seclusion transgresses the boundaries of morality and falls into the realm of impossibility. Yet, it cannot be denied that cultures, civilizations, and nations have their differences that we should not disregard. It is for this reason that we see, as our world gets ever more globalized, various cultures and national as well as cultural preferences get accentuated.

This diverse plurality on the one hand, coupled with unprecedented inter-relatedness on the other, has the potential to lead into interminable war and devastation, as it permeated the last century. It could, on the other hand, be a harbinger of an era of peace and humanity, should we base communication among nations upon a sense of mutual understanding and empathy. The call to Dialogue among Civilizations as welcomed by the international community adopts this latter approach.

Today, at the dawn of the third millennium, we cannot afford to ignore the despicable phenomenon called terrorism. The discourse of terror can only gain ground when all other means of establishing sound relationships in human societies have failed, and as such it drives humanity into an impasse where violence escalates and runs its roots ever deeper.

Love and compassion are divine gifts to the human soul, which provides the very keystone of relationships between human beings with God, among human beings themselves, and between humans and the universe. Humanity today, more than ever needs to appreciate this fundamental tenet of religiosity and spirituality. Believers in all religions share in this crucial understanding even though in human history, we can regrettably see that unjustifiable human error has often turned religion into an instrument aimed at justifying inhuman behavior and restricting the scope of human interaction. But this surely contradicts the purpose of God and divine messengers.

Our call to Dialogue among Civilizations is an invitation to replace the discourse of violence and hostility with a discourse of mutual understanding and reason. Any dialogue among civilizations and cultures is incumbent upon taking into consider-

ation the most fundamental cultural and civilizational element, that is religion, beyond historical prejudice and fanaticism.

In such a dialogue, we should emphasize bright points of essential concordance, and leave aside divisive issues, which derive not from the essence of religions but only from historical factional conditions and only when fanaticism prevails over fairness.

Leaders, scholars and thinkers in our world today play a key role in nurturing the common human yearning for truth, understanding and compassion, and in freeing us all from historically conditioned prejudice.

One cannot but wonder in bewilderment at the insurmountable gap between Jesus Christ who was all for love, beauty, freedom and compassion on the one hand, and the appalling character of a cardinal who sides with Satan and whom Dostoyevsky mockingly calls “the Chief Inspector” in his *Brothers Karamazov*.

The gap is so insurmountable between the teachings of Moses, who strived not only to set the Israelites free from the injustice of the Pharaoh, but indeed aimed to set humanity free from slavery and to establish justice, on the one hand, and the violent racist misinterpretation that has driven a nation out of its homeland, and subjects them to perpetual massacre in their own land.

Islam too calls “In the Name of God, the Compassionate the Merciful” in the Holy Quran as well as in all Islamic ritual, and stresses God’s compassion and mercy as prevailing over His other attributes. But unfortunately, we see how an obscurantist misrepresentation of Islam terrorizes the world and who ever does not share in its fanatical illusions, subjecting innocent women, men and children to blind wrath misnamed a Holy War or Jihad.

September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy caused by the terrorists must have awakened us to the necessity of finding a way to save humanity, and to engender hope for the future.

Our world yearns for peace, and true peace can only come about through changing ourselves and our world. We should heed the divine commandment and strive to establish justice for all humanity. Religious scholars face a particularly challenging responsibility at this juncture in time.

Our world is weary of war and violence and longs for a coalition aimed at establishing peace, a peace based upon justice. We should strive to base our coalition upon compassion and justice as opposed to violence and terror. Only through such an effort can we hope to eradicate terrorism.

The most crucial point would be for us to emphasize our many commonalities, the most significant of which is the belief in One God who is Wise, Just, Compassionate and Merciful. We also ought to recognize the intimate connection between the human spirit and the spirit of the universe that is eternal and everlasting. Another point of common departure is to realize that human life transcends the boundaries of everyday mundane life, and it should progress toward morality in individual and collective life. Respect for human rights wherever they are, and accepting for every human being a right to knowledge, freedom, and having a good life, shall result from the prevalence of justice in the world and in human relations.

The modern world has undoubtedly bestowed many rewards unto humanity, but

it seems to have neglected a crucial truth, and consequently to have fallen victim to escalating war, violence and terrorism. We need to remind ourselves of that crucial truth.

Modern society takes human reason as the organizing principle for all institutions, laws, social and civil relationships, and human rights. Even various forms of collectivism, meant to counterbalance excessive individualism, build upon a plurality of human reason. It is true that in the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the Quran, the human individual is addressed. By listening to the divine call, human reason is elevated to human personhood. Religions teach us that the central prominence of human beings in the universe is not caused by their individuality or their collectivity, but stems from our being addressed by the Divine. The divine call elevates the human spirit and thereby makes possible the establishment of justice in the world. Should we in the modern world realize this truth, and should we prepare ourselves to recognize the divine call, we shall be able to transcend from individuality to personhood.

All human beings have been addressed by God, and are all His servants. As such, undeserved privileges shall be abolished, and all humans shall be deemed equal in determining their own destiny.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, endorsed by the great nation of Iran with the aim of establishing a system of government by the people and for the people based on religion, recognized God as the source of sovereignty, and states that He has bestowed human beings with the capacity to determine their own destiny.

Government by the people and for the people, an ideal which we all value, is indeed attainable through this approach. Thereby the privileges of democracy are augmented with spirituality in human society. The lack of such an element has already caused too much carnage in our world, and its neglect bodes even further destruction.

Humans are in search of meaning and morality. And religion fosters meaning and morality. However, we should always bear in mind that morality is concomitant to freedom and not coercion. The first precondition for having a moral society is to have a free society, where freedom is understood. Another precondition is to have justice prevail in the society. Morality and meaning can be experienced in a society where human dignity is preserved and human rights are respected. By having these goals realized, democracy can be experienced from the vantage point of religion and morality, and enjoyed by all.