



## IDENTITY AND PLURALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

Muhammad Mahfouz ●

### Discovering the self

**C**an a person understand himself except in relation to the “other” – i.e. something outside himself? Can he live without the “other”, or is the relationship between the self and the “other” an interaction between the individual and the group (i.e. fellow members of society) which proves that the self can only be understood through an understanding of the “other”? In other words, does the self (however it is defined) need a relationship with the “other” (however the “other” is defined)?

If the self is defined in religious terms, then it is vital that it should be able to understand itself and coexist at a proper human level with the religious “other”. And if it is defined in terms of nation, race or sect, then it will be unable to grasp the realities of life unless it enjoys a proper network of relationships with the appropriate “other”. The “other”, whatever form it takes, is a mirror of the self, whatever form the self takes. Nobody who

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● Writer from Saudi Arabia.



seeks his own self can grasp its reality and essential nature unless he understands the “other” and its needs. The “other” is a mirror of the self; it is not the actual self per se in isolation from the actual “other”.

We therefore believe, on the basis of philosophical reasoning and empirical experience, that any claim that one can dispense with the “other” – in whatever terms such a claim may be justified – is incompatible with the laws of human existence.

Any denial of the “other” - or claim that it should be eradicated - will only lead the self to cling obstinately to the peculiarities and quirks of its own character.

We believe – in other words - that any ideology or move aimed at purging the self of the “other” can only reinforce the “sub-national identities” that it is considered desirable to eliminate and suppress.

This is why the “religious other” is an existential necessity for the “religious self”, while the “confessional/sectarian other” is an existential necessity for the “confessional/sectarian self”. The same applies to all other associations and affiliations that define the self and the “other”. However well-endowed and experienced the self may be – according to the Egyptian writer Samir Murqus – as long as it remains confined within its limits it will always feel an intense existential need to extend beyond those limits on the grounds that the “other” may be endowed with resources and experience that it – i.e. the self – is not aware of. Or the self may be aware of them, yet recognise that its own continued existence depends – to a large extent if not totally – upon putting its own resources and experience to the test, either through interaction with the “other”, or at least by discovering what the “other” is endowed with.

The “other” is, by definition, different from the self and will always be an area ripe for discovery.

In its exploratory journey towards the “other”, the self rediscovers and begins to understand itself. The self cannot *be* the self unless the “other” exists.

Anyone who seeks to discover himself and understand his own values and culture must become familiar with the values and cultures of others.



Isolation and introspection do not lead to self-discovery, even if isolation is an ideological choice.

Nor can a narcissistic consideration of the self, its values and its principles lead to a knowledge and understanding of its cultural reality and values, because narcissism gives a person the illusion that he has no need of others, whatever their knowledge and achievements.

So isolation is conducive neither to understanding the self, nor to self-discovery; nor does it enable a person to dispense with other people. Nor are self-centredness and self-obsession the way to discover the self; indeed they lead a person to develop an attitude to the self that is incapable of awakening its owner and enabling him to discover his hidden potential and strengths. Only openness and interaction with others can lead to self-discovery.

So we need to recognise an important social and cultural truth, which is that isolation is not the proper way to safeguard the self. It is, in fact, a way of escaping from reality. History has recorded not one single instance of a society successfully protecting itself and its achievements through introspection and isolation. The way to safeguard the self is through a judicious degree of openness, cultural and social contacts and interaction with others. It is not possible to protect the things one holds dear by turning in on oneself. Instead, one needs to interact constantly with the “other”. Whatever differences there may be between oneself and the “other”, there can be no justification for introspection and isolation. Quite the contrary. Nor can there be any possibility of dealing satisfactorily with religious, sectarian or intellectual differences unless people of different persuasions interact with each other.

**We believe – strongly – that the following are essential preconditions of self-discovery:**

1. Whatever qualifications and strengths a person may have, he will not be able to realise himself and improve himself unless he has a network of natural, sound relationships with his social, cultural and national environment.



A sound human being cannot live without other people; he needs to establish relations with them. And to do this he needs to be open to, and ready to interact and co-operate with, others. A relationship of this kind is simultaneously “conditional and dialectic” – to quote Samir Murqus – “between the self and the ‘other’”. It is a relationship of the utmost complexity in which freeing the self from a blind self-obsession (in which it only sees itself - or perhaps does not see itself - and reaches a dead end) becomes conditional upon the “other”. This is the “conditional dimension” of the relationship. At the same time, freeing the self from being imprisoned within its limits and going out to meet the “other” involves a fresh recognition of the “other’s” strong points and, by implication, the self’s weak points. This is the “dialectical dimension” of the relationship. Naturally, the converse is also true. This process also corrects the stereotypical image or prejudiced view that each side (the self and the “other”) has of the other.

2. A different “other” is not to be regarded as a target for rejection and harsh words but as a partner for dialogue and interaction. Differences, however great they may be, do not give anyone the right to harm or abuse the “different other”.

The two sides should not exchange insults and think ill of each other, but treat each other with fairness and equity.

The only way we can enjoy a fair and just relationship with the “different other” is through dialogue, interaction and co-operation.

There is nothing wrong or shameful about having differences of opinion. Differences are an essential part of human life. What is extremely shameful is if we allow those differences to lead to conflict and mutual hostility.

## On identity

We would not be wrong if we were to say that, despite the developments we have witnessed in the modern age, we still need to have a clear identity rooted in our own history and society.

Modern institutions and systems can never offer an alternative to an



identity of this kind, though this is what Joseph Strayer was recommending when he wrote: “It has become possible to do without the old ways in which a person finds his identity within a particular society. A person without a family, without a fixed abode and without any religious affiliation can now lead an adequately complete life”.

This and similar views see having a national identity as something fundamental and permanent, while retaining one’s historical and religious roots is something secondary (or to put it another way, according to such views a person can exchange those roots for another identity that is “mobile” or “flexible”). This view, if implemented, would lead to a breakdown of the moral and social fabric and create psychological instability – i.e. the factors needed for an identity that expresses, and is compatible with, people’s attitudes and beliefs.

When we preserve our identity in a positive, aware manner and translate its values and principles into action, we can succeed in achieving progress and creating modern institutions. However, modern institutions themselves, which are subject to change and modification, can never provide us with a serviceable permanent national identity.

It is identity that produces social and cultural development, not its converse. It is completely wrong to think that technology can take the place of identity and an awareness of belonging to a particular culture.

We find that the cultural transformation – or let us say disfigurement - that imperialism has imposed upon colonised peoples who have their own history and civilization has not led those people to abandon their identity. What it has actually done is reinforce their sense of identity and their attachment to it. This is because identity – with its creedal and cultural strands – is fundamental to maintaining the social balance and the strength of a society’s fabric. Any shortcomings in that respect will set in motion the process of that society’s decline.

Identity’s basic function is to determine the shape and composition of society in a way that is compatible with its creedal and historical outlook. During every era of human history, an absence of identity or a weakened



sense of identity has been a fundamental factor in creating psychological and social imbalance and instability. Conversely, psychological and social stability – as the basis for improved productivity and better living standards (both material and non-material) – is determined by the strength of a society’s awareness of its identity, particularly its creedal and cultural components.

Genuine achievements in any society are the product of a harmonious relationship between social activity and identity in which the elements that make up that society’s identity are embodied – or embedded – in the activity in which it engages.

Now let us briefly consider the sort of activities that occur more or less in a vacuum and outside the context of history. What I am referring to are those kinds of activities that do not channel people’s energies and potential into improving their civilization and conditions; at best, they are of the “imitative” variety that chases eagerly after the achievements of others while ignoring the underlying values that gave rise to them; they are inspired by attitudes that almost consider civilization to be a commodity that can be bought and sold.

By contrast, identity – and here again I am including its creedal and cultural components – is an ongoing source of creative potential that enables society to maintain a balance between its material and non-material needs – between body and soul, the individual and society, and the state and the community.

This is how identity establishes cohesion between members of society and enables them to realise their human qualities to the full and compete with other nations and peoples in acquiring knowledge and all the other fruits of civilization. Any weakening or loss of identity leads society into blind imitation of other peoples and their lifestyles. Idris Sharayi has written the following graphic description of this state of affairs: “Imagine a black man becoming a white man overnight while his nose remains black because fate happens to have overlooked it. I wore a jacket and trousers, a belt round my waist, socks and a shirt and I had a handkerchief in my pocket. I felt proud. I was a little European, but I found that I was a laughing stock when



I was with my friends. And I was indeed ridiculous. We should not regard identity as a matter of imitation and fashion. Nor is being modern objectively the same as being Western and ‘up to date’ on the European model. We need to look at identity as the key to the rapid, robust development of all the nation’s energies for the sake of growth and progress”.

This means that our nation’s options for overcoming its present predicament and achieving progress and development will only be viable if they are genuinely compatible with, or derived from, its identity and true character. A proper relationship with one’s identity is guaranteed to restore the nation’s creative vigour and boost its ability to play its historic role in the world. For decades our nation has poured massive resources into development projects and options that are incompatible with its national identity, and the result has been further backwardness and an exacerbation of its predicament. Consequently, it has found itself hobbled and handicapped at home and unable to move forward.

We have seen huge scientific and technological progress that has broken down borders and turned the world into what Marshall McLuhan has called a “global village”. There has also been a massive explosion of information. However, the result of all these developments has been to push mankind on to the edge of a steep precipice or – at best – turn them into avid technology and IT junkies.

Therefore, in order to deal with these developments it is essential that there should be a proper social balance so that society can keep abreast of progress without losing its self (i.e. its identity).

Social balance can only be maintained on the basis of identity, and a sense of that identity must encompass the whole of society. At the same time, this does not mean that we are seeking an identity that cuts us off from the rest of the world and the mainstream of human life.

What we want to see is a return to, and the preservation of, the culture, values and principles that we are in danger of losing, because it is those values that enable man to invest all his energies and potential in his nation’s future progress. Ensuring continued links and interaction between



our present and our past will provide the proper breeding ground for cultural renewal and creativity.

Anyone who seeks a standard, uniform identity and rejects diversity is chasing after the impossible and going against human nature and social reality. “If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people”.

(*Al Ma’ida* 48).

### Complex identities

There have been numerous ideological and political initiatives aimed at creating a “simple identity” – that is, a general identity based on an ideology or a political theory.

These initiatives – which are totalitarian in character - have shown themselves more than prepared to use force to ensure that their ideology and style of identity are universally applied and eradicate any cultural or ideological identities that may differ from it. It would be fair to say that in one way or another these initiatives have been coercive to society as a whole and have resulted in the authorities erasing some aspects of its original character and replacing them with other features of their own choosing. This would appear to be one of the major causes of the crises and tensions between different social classes and groups that afflict some of our Arab and Islamic communities, since simple identities are a phenomenon that is alien to human societies. All human identities are complex identities; this means that they are created from numerous different sources and strands which have combined to produce the cultures and ways of thinking of every individual and group in the world of today.

The relationship between the “I” – or the “ego” - and the “other” is not as clear-cut as totalitarians and Manichean-type ideologues of the “either for or against” variety suppose. Some of the cultural and social “other” is from the cultural and social “self”, while some of the cultural and social “self” is from the cultural and social “other”. Hence all general human identities are composite or complex identities comprising numerous different factors and elements. Anyone who seeks a pure, unadulterated identity will only find it in his dreams or in an ideological theory.





Human social realities prove beyond any shadow of doubt that people's identities are complex in the sense that they consist of an interwoven fabric of cultural, social and psychological strands comprising both the "I" at every level and the "other" at every level and in every context. Hence any effort by an individual or an institution to establish a "pure" identity is unrealistic to the point of fanaticism, because it will come in conflict with some of the cultural or social elements that are present in the public space.

(One definition of fanaticism is "any theoretical or practical action aimed at imposing a general view or position, involving the use of force or coercion or the two together").

At the same time, feeling that one can live without others, or a belief that the self's resources are superior to, and purer than, the "other's", encourages a Utopian attitude that is incompatible with human and social realities.

Most – if not all – individuals today have a sense of belonging or affiliation in a number of different contexts and from a number of different sources that feed and sustain both their minds and their souls. Therefore, forcing people into one context and one context only, or one form of identity, will drive them to cling obstinately to all those elements which go to make up their complex identities.

It could well be this type of coercion that is responsible for many of the crises and tensions in our Arab and Islamic world. The Francophone writer Amin Ma'alouf illustrates this truth in his book "In the Name of Identity", in which he shows that using violence and coercion to deal with the multiple strands of individual and collective identity will ultimately turn that identity into a "killer identity". He writes: "The identities of every individual consist of a large number of elements. Naturally, they are not limited to the particulars listed in official records. The vast majority have religious or national affiliations, and sometimes they have two nationalities. They may belong to a particular ethnic or language group, or a nuclear or extended family, a profession or institution or a certain social environment. The list may be longer than this; in fact, one could suppose that it is limitless; it could include a sense of loyalty to a region, a village or a residential



quarter, a clan, football team, professional association or group of friends, a trade union, a company, an association or a parish, or a group of people who share a common hobby or pastime. Of course, not all these loyalties and affiliations are of equal significance – at least, not at the same time. However, none of them can be ignored altogether, since they are the elements that go to make up a personality, or what one might call ‘psychological genes’, though one needs to point out that most of them are not instinctive”.

A person’s attitude to the different component parts of his identity is determined by the environment in which he lives. If the environment is confrontational, hostile and coercive, he will determinedly cling to those aspects that are under attack. On the other hand, if it is flexible, benign and understanding, he will enjoy a positive, active and fruitful relationship with all the different component parts of his identity.

Religious, sectarian, national or racial tensions are partly due to a coercive attempt to deal with some aspects of an individual’s or a group’s affiliations. What is required to ensure peaceful coexistence between all the different elements of our countries and societies – and their political and social stability – is an across-the board positive and open approach.

It is the societies that deal flexibly and tolerantly with all their component parts and sectors that enjoy political and social stability. Anyone who seeks stability without flexibility and tolerance will only find more chaos, unrest and tension, because a coercive approach entrenches the differences between people. This lies at the heart of numerous crises and tensions.

Therefore, to achieve security and political stability steps must be taken to re-establish good relations between the identities of the different subsections of society on a basis of dialogue and mutual respect. Only then will it be possible to find acceptance for the principle of citizenship encompassing every section of the community in which all people enjoy equal rights and obligations.



## Defining moderation

I believe that no society can achieve cultural progress, develop its expertise and broaden the scope of its activities unless it clearly defines its terms. This is because numerous terms and expressions in current use are understood in different ways by different people and this leads to considerable confusion.

For example, when we speak of democracy we are referring to the concept without defining what exactly it means. All sections of society - and individuals - use this term, but each one gives it a different interpretation. That is why we believe that every term and expression in current use must be precisely defined in a way that everybody accepts and understands. Only then will the cultural life of the community be able to flourish and yield its benefits.

Perhaps the most important concept – and one which is found everywhere these days – is the concept of “moderation”. Everybody – and every writer – calls for moderation and regards it as the lifebelt that will provide salvation from a host of problems and conflicts. But what is moderation? How can it be defined? Not nearly enough effort is being made yet to determine precisely what it means.

“Moderation” is not a word to treat lightly - a word to which we may assign trivial meanings like “the mid-point between two vices”. It is a deep intellectual and political concept with far broader connotations than mere “middle-of-the-roadness”.

This is because all human societies without exception believe strongly that their own values and principles are *the* human/natural values par excellence and occupy precisely the middle ground between two vices. All societies reject excess in matters of religion and extremism in attitudes to values.

Equally, all societies – theoretically – reject abandonment of accepted norms and the higher virtues and values.

All societies, regardless of their religions and ideologies, consider themselves to be the embodiments of moderation.



However, in practice all these societies differ from each other in the level of their commitment to moderation and its implications and this is why the concept has become fluid and vague. A person may consider himself to be moderate, while others may regard him as an extremist. And vice versa.

That is why we think it is vital to define moderation clearly. This concept is not a complete ideology or belief system, but a notion whose meaning needs to be defined in political-cultural terms. So the question we need to ask here is: What are the terms that most clearly describe moderation, regardless of any ideology that may be behind the concept? Because every ideology claims to be the only one to grasp the true meaning of moderation.

Accordingly, we believe that moderation is best summed up as follows:

### **1 – Accepting pluralism and diversity in human society**

One of the main elements that determines the definition of moderation and its social and political connotations is the level of acceptance extended to pluralism at every level in human societies around the world.

A person cannot be moderate if he rejects pluralism or refuses to accept its implications. This is despite the fact that everyone claims that he, and he alone, is on the right path and that he alone is imbued with all the virtues.

However, what are the practical proofs of such claims?. There aren't any...

We believe that the precise meaning of moderation is not the “happy medium” between severity and laxity. We would define it as an aware, ethical attitude which recognises the reality of pluralism and treats diversity as one of the eternal values that one must never fight against or try to eradicate.

Anybody who rejects this value and reality is an immoderate person, even if he claims to be moderate. A genuinely moderate person is one who responds to pluralism in an intelligent, civilized way and in a spirit of tolerance.



We believe that accepting this eternal human truth is the truest and most practical demonstration of the concept of moderation.

Every individual or society that respects this truth and deals with it intelligently and in a civilized manner should be described as moderate, regardless of his religion or ideology. On this basis, a moderate person may be a Muslim or he may not. In our view the crux of the matter is the extent to which the individual or group accepts pluralism and all its implications.

## **2 – Respect for others and upholding their basic rights**

Is it possible for a person to be moderate while violating a person's human rights and attacking those things that he holds most dear?

We believe that a person cannot be described as moderate unless he respects other people, regardless of their religion and beliefs, and upholds their basic rights.

People belong to one of two categories – either they are your brothers in religion or they are your moral peers – so one has absolutely no right to attack their rights or fail to respect them as human beings.

Any ideology or epistemology aimed at violating the rights of those who differ from it must be classed as extremist, even if it claims to be moderate. The crux of the matter lies in actual behaviour and the level of respect for a person and his basic rights.

Human rights cannot be upheld without a broad vision of what they comprise and how they can best be protected, and society itself must have the will to make that vision a reality. A moderate society respects human rights and seeks – through its official and unofficial institutions – to ensure that all the conditions are in place for safeguarding human dignity.

## **3 – Openness and a readiness to interact with other cultures**

The concept of moderation is rooted in “cultural relativism”, in that it involves recognising that the truth is the exclusive preserve of no single human being in the whole wide world. One person is in possession of part of the truth, while the rest is “distributed” among the rest of mankind.



Cultural relativism should leave no place for introspection and isolation or an illusory sense of self-sufficiency; on the contrary, it is vital that it should lead to openness and a readiness to interact with others. Knowledge and understanding of the world and existence is a reality that is “distributed” among the whole of mankind, so mankind’s constituent components are obliged to interact with each other in order to reap the benefits of the knowledge and cultures of other people.

This means that moderation in culture, politics and the social sphere is incompatible with isolation, introspection and a sense that one has no need for other people. What it does mean is that one needs to exchange ideas with other people, learn about their culture and benefit from their knowledge.

Isolation, inflated egos and narcissism are incompatible with moderation. Moderation – as an epistemic and cultural concept – means openness and a creative interaction with all human cultures.

Without this, a society cannot be considered moderate, because an acceptance of pluralism is the essence of moderation in any social group, as well as in politics.

Man is a self-respecting creature and enjoys respect. Allah says: “We have honoured the sons of Adam”. (Al Israa’ 70). As man has been honoured by the Creator, his private and public rights must be upheld and protected.

Moderation, then, is an integral part of civilized behaviour. It does not mean that people or societies should not compete with each other, but it provides the right conditions for society to express itself freely and give free rein to all its segments and classes, thereby enabling them to assert their individuality and play their part in contributing to human civilization and culture.

### **Pluralism and mutual respect**

It is no secret that our society – like other human societies – comprises a number of different “pluralities” and strands. If they are handled correctly, they can enrich and strengthen our society and our country. Just because



our society is not monolithic, this does not mean that we should sweep our differences under the carpet or – even worse – try to straighten them out. Pluralism is not merely a natural part of the life of any human society; it is one of the laws of human existence and societies are basically pluralistic by their very nature. Societies that find themselves in difficulties do not do so because they fail to recognise this fact, but because they are unable to establish social, cultural, political and legal systems capable of dealing with it without violence or coercion. Therefore any attempt to suppress or attack pluralism will have a destabilising effect and give rise to clashes and conflicts that will harm social and political security.

If we recognise the reality of pluralism, this does not mean that we are expected to hold identical opinions on everything. Any religious, confessional or national group has the right to differ and express contrary views, but in a way that does not cause offence or harm to others. We therefore call upon all sections of society to work together to produce a national charter that will affirm the right of diversity and pluralism, as well as the principle of mutual respect for opinions and symbols. We are not all – from our respective religious, confessional and political standpoints – expected to share the same views on every issue or historical event. However, we are all expected to respect each other's opinions and not allow ourselves to offend others or attack their beliefs.

We reject vituperation, abuse and preconceived value-judgements. In recognising our differences, we commit ourselves to upholding the rights of others to their own beliefs and affiliations. The only way to accommodate pluralism is through mutual respect. Anyone has the right to take the greatest of pride in his own beliefs and opinions, but not at the expense of others' dignity.

We hope that, where differences are concerned, we can see hostility and mutual recrimination replaced by an objective relationship based on everybody's right to disagree. There is nothing wrong with pride in one's religion, family or any other natural human affiliation as long as it does not lead to a lack of mutual respect.

Arabs today belong to different countries with different social and



regional environments. However, wherever they come from and whatever their origins, they are all proud to be Arabs. An Arab citizen, whether he is from the east or the west of the Arab world, sees no contradiction between pride in his country and region and pride in being a member of the Arab Nation.

What is true of an Arab citizen with regard to his national affiliation is also true of his affiliations at other levels.

Today we are living through a crucial historic period which we might describe as a “moment of sub-national identity explosions in the lives of people and societies”. If we do not respond to this moment wisely and intelligently, we will find that it is fraught with dangers and challenges.

Promoting mutual respect and pluralism between different social and creedal groups will help lessen the impact of any “sub-national identity explosions”. Conversely, a lack of mutual respect and a contemptuous, aggressive attitude to other peoples’ and societies’ identities will lead to further social, political and security fragmentation and breakdown.

In brief: We believe that it is vital to push hard for mutual respect between different social and political groups if we are to prevent those differences from escalating into instability, tensions and crisis.

### **Islamic dialogue and breaking down stereotypical attitudes**

There are numerous obstacles to the development of closer relations between Muslims. (Here I am referring to all Muslims, regardless of their sects and doctrinal and philosophical schools.) In every Arab and Islamic country where there are different Islamic sects and schools of *fiqh* (doctrine/jurisprudence) there are problems and sensitivities that hinder progress towards better mutual understanding, co-operation and unity between Muslims. This has resulted in antipathy, suspicion and a lack of serious interaction between Muslims in every Islamic country and region.

This state of affairs is not natural to us and the problems – whether they are current or due to historical reasons – are not insoluble. What we need is a new awareness and a new common will that will give top priority





to improving relations between Muslims and Muslims, because in our view many of the problems and crises in our countries and regions can only be overcome through putting our Muslim house in order first. The fact that Muslims belong to different sects and schools does not excuse a refusal to speak to one another. Nor do differences of opinion between Muslims justify declarations of hostility by any party towards another.

In His Book the Creator – Glory be to Him – states that relations between Muslims, whatever their colour, region or sect, should be based upon mercy and kindness: “**Compassionate amongst each other**”. (*Al Fath* 29).

This means that compassion should be the dominant value governing relations between Muslims, and that doctrinal or national differences are no justification for a lack of compassion.

Whatever differences there may be, they do not justify rushing to judgement or insulting or demeaning others. What they should do is demonstrate the need for dialogue, interaction and an objective exchange of views.

Historical events should be seen objectively and the part played in them by every Muslim should be respected. The fact that Muslims have different interpretations of certain periods and incidents in history does not provide anyone with an excuse to insult those things that other Muslims revere and hold dear. Therefore, for religious, moral and humanitarian reasons we regard insults and recrimination as a completely wrong approach; we believe it to be incompatible with Islamic ethics and certainly not conducive to a brotherly spirit.

Our destiny as Arabs and Muslims is to live together. We need to open up our minds and prepare ourselves to do so, not just because coexistence is compatible with Islamic values, but also because it demonstrates a readiness to accept our destiny.

We need to stop fighting and overcome our delusions that lead us to practise discrimination and separatism. We must adopt a mature attitude and declare that we need to overcome our difficulties by recognising the challenges we face at present and embracing the hopes our future holds. Coexistence is a



long struggle against the unacceptable and the way to achieve it is through reconciliation and working together for the common good.

Islam stresses the vital importance of working with others on the basis of “Do unto others as you would have them do to you. Be just in your judgements and fair in dispensing justice”.

The way to “straighten out what is crooked” begins through working with others. Seeing the “other” as the equal of the self creates a strong, interwoven social fabric that is harmonious in its different strands and relationships.

Seeing the “other” as the equal of the self will advance the cause of common values and help ensure that they enjoy pride of place in society, and it will heighten a person’s sense of responsibility to others. All these elements are essential for building a solid, durable social structure.

Re-establishing relations between the different Islamic sects and schools on a new basis requires serious effort from all sides to break down existing stereotypical attitudes. It is these attitudes that reinforce the psychological barriers between Muslims and prevent them from developing better mutual understanding and co-operation.

### **Citizenship is the answer**

A person has numerous different affiliations, tendencies and ideological and political beliefs and it is hard to find any group of human beings who are completely homogeneous in every respect. If they share a common religion they may belong to different sects, and if they belong to the same sect, they may differ from each other in race or nationality, and if they are of the same race or nationality, they may be of different religions or sects or come from different regions.

Anyway, whatever the case may be, pluralism and diversity are an integral part of human life and it is impossible to find a community whose members live lives that are homogeneous in every respect.

A lack of homogeneity in some areas of life or affiliation does not mean



that people should have nothing to do with one another. Quite the opposite. The multiplicity of their areas of affiliation should lead them to interact and develop the points and areas they have in common. Everyone – regardless of his ideology – is proud of those elements that go to make them what they are, but that pride does not mean shutting oneself away and having nothing to do with other people or adopting hostile attitudes to them. For numerous reasons Divine Wisdom has ordained that humans should be by nature diverse and have a range of different affiliations and loyalties. However, He has not made us this way so that we should isolate ourselves from our fellow men; rather, His intention is that we should know each other and work together for the common good, as He explains in the verse: **“O mankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other”**. (*Al Hujurat* 13).

The Creator – Glory be to Him – placed us in a multiplicity of contexts (nations and tribes), not so that we may fight and kill each other, but so that we may “know each other”. The first step to “knowing each other” is a recognition of other people’s right to exist, express themselves freely, develop common ground and approach the areas of difference between each other in a rational and orderly manner.

The beauty of being human lies in our diversity. Any attempt to standardise us by force or eradicate the differences between us is an attack upon the Divine Laws governing human life.

When we recognise our diversity we all take on the responsibility of maintaining and protecting it. This can only be done through mutual respect, direct face-to-face contacts and breaking down all barriers to fellowship and co-operation. Therefore we must all refrain from insulting or offending each other in any way, whether directly or indirectly.

If we should ever come across instances of offence or insult, this should not result in our making generalised judgements. Vituperation of any kind is to be rejected, but if some people are guilty of it, those on the receiving end have no right to class everyone as guilty. Over-generalisation is the bane of justice and anyone committed to the principles of justice needs to be careful to avoid it.



Allah – may He be Blessed, the Most High – says: “Let not the hatred of others make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just; that is next to piety”. (*Al Ma'idah* 8).

Differences of opinion, belief and affiliation are no excuse for injustice.

Modern-day thinking on legal and constitutional matters and civilized behaviour has come up with an inclusive legal view aimed at ensuring harmonious relations between the different sections and strands of a single society.

That view is epitomised in the one word “citizenship”.

While a multiplicity of affiliations should not lead to isolation and introspection, neither should it generate political and cultural options that threaten stability and national unity. What it needs to do is create relationships based on common ground that transcend the limits of “sub-national identities”. “Citizenship” provides the legal and political framework for relations between all citizens and defines their responsibilities, rights and duties.

In the era of “sub-national identity explosions” the concept of citizenship is vital. Citizenship is the answer to our problems. It lifts everybody out of their “sub-national identities” to a new level at which they can all enjoy equality as citizens of a single society and nation. In support of the “citizenship option” we should like to make the following points:

1. The sectarianism we see today in certain Arab countries does not justify taking sides in a spirit of mutual hostility and partisanship. What is required is national unity, coalitions and alliances between the different sects and schools, and a common desire to get to grips with the problem.

In these sensitive circumstances the cultural, academic and political elites should not adopt biased and entrenched positions. What they need to do is try to tackle the curse of sectarianism, which is harmful to everybody and benefits no-one.

Sectarian problems in any society should not prompt scholars, writers and intellectuals to adopt partisan attitudes and write provocative articles that widen the rifts in the country and the community. Instead, they should



all shoulder their religious, cultural and national responsibilities as citizens and try to find ways of resolving the problems.

Today's sectarian problems cannot be solved through sectarian mobilisation or stirring people up against those who happen to follow a different religious school. The answer is citizenship and encouraging everyone to look at their country from a broad perspective in which the citizen is the cornerstone of the relationship between all of its people.

Citizenship is the key to tackling sectarian tensions within an Arab and Islamic framework. It is not a magic or ready-made solution, but it provides the ground for political and cultural rights and unity in religiously, nationally or racially pluralistic societies.

Only citizenship can promote unity within a single national framework.

2. The culture of “cleansing” and separation between the different sects in a single country does not create stability; nor does it free societies from their historical and current complexes and tensions. In fact, it has quite the opposite effect.

History teaches us that a society composed of diverse strands can never achieve stability through “cleansing” and the creation of separate communities. Stability comes from a culture of inclusiveness, political flexibility, the establishment of common ground and the development of relationships on the basis of a common citizenship.

However difficult the situation we face, and whatever the tensions, we need to persist in carrying the torch of unity, tolerance and mutual understanding and respect.

3. Sectarian bigotry is one of the factors that militates against citizenship and encourages relationships based on sect rather than national identity.

To promote the notion of citizenship we need to build a moderate society that transcends the different sects, schools and other “sub-national identities”. Otherwise, bigotry and partisanship will remain entrenched in the fabric of society and threaten the nation's social and political stability.