



# Freedom and Citizenship; Diversity and Integration



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The Grand Imam & Shaykh of Al-Azhar



## The Al-Azhar International Conference on 'Freedom and Citizenship; Diversity and Integration'

*Shaykh al-Azhar announces Al-Azhar's Declaration for Muslim Christian Coexistence at the conference hosted by Al-Azhar and the Muslim Council of Elders in Cairo.*

On 28 February 2017, an international conference organized by Al-Azhar and the Muslim Council of Elders took place in Cairo, Egypt. The conference was titled 'Freedom and Citizenship: Diversity and Integration'. The conference was organised to present Al-Azhar's Declaration for Muslim Christian Coexistence, and to promote international peace. It was attended by around 600 delegates, academic figures, and Muslim and Christian religious figures from over 50 countries, with over 60 papers being presented on the theme of the conference delivered by the delegates, advocating the concepts of freedom, citizenship and coexistence.

The conference was hosted by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and Chair of the Muslim Council of Elders, Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb Shaykh al-Azhar, who delivered the following speech in the opening session of the conference.



In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful and Compassionate!

Greetings! Dear Eminent Academics at the Platform! Dear Guests!

In the name of the institution of Al-Azhar and in the name of the Muslim Council of Elders, I welcome you all! Egypt is welcoming you, and we are glad to convene such an important conference, in a time our region and the whole world are going through very minute and exceptional circumstances and very hard times, especially after wars have broken out in our Arab and Islamic region, without any rational reason, that a human mind, in the twenty first century, can accept.

Amazingly, but also sadly and painfully, Islam has been depicted in such a depressing scene, as the main cause for the outbreak of these wars, and that Islam stands behind the collapse of the World Trade Center, and the attack on the Bataclan Theater, and the Metro stations, and that innocent victims have fallen in Nice and other cities in the West and the East because of the Islamic teachings. We definitely deplore such disastrous and horrible depictions of Islam, which expands and becomes darker day after day. While extremism and radicalism have been growing, the righteous understanding of the truth of the heavenly religions has been reduced, and the significance of the prophets' messages has been, resoundingly, clashed with false interpretations that religions, nowadays, are following, and even abduct the holy texts, to fall in the hands of few malefactor dissenters, who work as a rifle for rent, for war brokers and arms dealers and the authors of the neocolonialism philosophies.

We should carefully consider and observe how this evil group acts, while it falsely raises the flag of Islam, until its members and affiliates start to exchange accusations of recrimination among them, and labeling each other as infidels (Takfir); and thus, we should know that the whole issue is not about religion, however, it is about how to exploit religion in different ways, in order to shed blood and stir violence.

Another thing that puts our hands on the lurking place of falsehood in these bloody calls and claims, is that the whole matter, according to those claimers, was not about correcting the path of religion, which they claimed it has been deviated from its righteous course, and that they have to correct and amend

it, in the context of the theoretical diligence and intellectual renewal; however, it was about how to take the innocents' souls and shed their blood, and how to venture and demolish the humanity's achievements, wherever they are, and whenever they were able to reach them out and destroy them.

Until recently, this stray group, deviated from the righteous path of religion, used to have a very limited impact and danger, since it was unable to deform the image of Muslims, due to its lack of numbers and arms. And now, this stray group is, unfortunately, about to mobilize and recruit the whole world against Islam. It is sufficient to realize how far the so-called phenomenon "Islamophobia" has its dreadful and awful impact on Muslims, in the northern and southern countries in the West.

We are not going to investigate the phenomenon of "Islamophobia", or the terrorism that serves this phenomenon, and works on increasing hatred against Islam and Muslims, day after day; and we are not going to discuss whether terrorism is a local or an international industry, and how it is perfectly manufactured and produced, to hit the whole world, whether unexpectedly, or by involving the human rights activists and those who defend and sponsor the world peace, peaceful coexistence, freedom and equality, and all the well-known principles mentioned in the international agreements, into a conspiracy to spread terrorism and violence worldwide.

In my opinion, however, seminars should be convened to investigate such a phenomenon and its dreadful impact, and men of religion, scholars and intellectuals should meet to expose this new epidemic, and to identify who is responsible for it and for the bloodshed and crimes committed in its name in the world.

And thus, the rational thinker, who investigates the so-called phenomenon of "Islamophobia", should not miss the illogical discrimination, or the double standard policy practiced during the global trial between Islam on one side, and Christianity and Judaism on the other side, despite the fact that the three religions share the same indictment and face the same accusations of inciting violence and religious terrorism. While the West absolves Christianity and Judaism from such accusations, Islam stands alone, facing such heinous accusations, and challenging the campaigns that aim at deforming and distorting its image.

And yes! The worst forms of Christian and Jewish violence had passed peacefully, in a complete separation between religion and terrorism; for example: Michael Bray's explosive attacks on abortion clinics, and Timothy McVeigh who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma, and the religious statement of David Koresh which caused the terrible events that took place in Texas. Nevertheless, we do not have to mention the religious conflict that took place in North Ireland, and the involvement of religious institutions in the extermination and rape of more than two hundred and fifty Muslims in Bosnia.

**Our Esteemed Public!** I did not mean –Allah knows– from this introduction which may overly be too long to open a wound or to provoke a conflict among human beings. This is neither the message of religions nor the message of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif; it is not even the message of the tolerant East nor of the civilized prudent West. I just want to say: If the religious institutions in the East and the West do not confront Islamophobia, it will affect Christianity and Judaism sooner or later. But then, the saying of: "I was devoured when the white bull was eaten" wouldn't work. There are a lot of stalkers of religions either atheists or those who announce the death of God, those who promote the materialistic philosophy, those who came from Nazi and communist cellars, those who call for legalization of drugs, damaging the family, replacement of "social sex", feticide, encouraging of abortion, the right of transsexualism without controls, replacing the globalization with nationalities, those who call for globalization and removing disparities among peoples after the cultural genocide and eliminating its cultural, religious and historical characteristics. And this call is developing now and being demanded to fall within the competence of the European Union ... All these calls and others are dreadfully forthcoming and will sweep first the divine religions because they believe that these religions are the source of wars. They believe that Christianity brought forth the crusades and Islam propagates terrorism and bloodshed; there is no solution but to remove religions off the face of the earth...Those ones would be radio silent about casualties of civil wars which were waged by atheists and secularist hardliners at the beginning and middle of the last century. Needless to say that religion had nothing to do with these wars. However, every pupil in early stages of education is able to review the victims of modern social schools to make sure that "history did not calculate the real number of the victims of the religions since the days of ignorance until now. Those victims who were killed, exiled or tortured for the

sake of false predictions were millions. All these predictions were false and it was clear beyond any doubt that they were impossible to be applied".

Dear esteemed academic guests! I think you agree with me that absolving religions of terrorism is no longer enough under these savage challenges. We must go one step further to match the principles and morals of religions with this troubled reality. This step requires, from my point of view, necessary preparations. First of all, we must remove all unjustified remaining mistrust and tensions among Presidents of religious institutions and scholars. If advocates of peace fail to achieve peace among each other, then they cannot give it to people; "no one gives what he doesn't have"! And this step, in its turn, could not be achieved, unless there is an acquaintance which requires cooperation and integration. This is mostly a religious requirement. The Islam which I boast embracing it, alerts us to that in a Qur'anic verse which Muslims and Christians memorize, since it has been frequently mentioned in congregations:

"O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware." [49:13]

Islam alerts us also to the inherent rights bestowed on human beings by Allah, which are the right of freedom and the right of freedom from pressure, especially with regard to freedom of religion, belief and embracing a religion:

"No compulsion is there in religion." [2:256]

"And if thy Lord had willed, whoever is in the earth would have believed, all of them, all together. Wouldst thou then constrain the people, until they are believers?" [10:99]

"Thou art not charged to oversee them." [88:22]

"We sent thee not to be a guardian over them." [42:48]

One of the items included in Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) message to people of Yemen: "Any Jewish or Christian who hates Islam, does

not convert to it", in addition to other religious texts that constitute the right of freedom and liberation.

Moreover, when Al-Azhar calls for propagating the concept of "citizenship" instead of "minority and minorities", it calls for a constitutional principle that was applied by the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) to the first Muslim society in history; that of "Madinah". He decided to equal between Muslims of Emigrants and Supporters and Jews of all tribes and sects, as he considered all citizens are equal in rights and duties. It is worth mentioning that the heritage of Islam kept a detailed document regarding this in the form of an unprecedented constitution.

Dear esteemed guests! I have made a lengthy statement, but my excuse is that your kind attention encourages me to read all burdens and pains written in this paper. Finally, I wish to thank most sincerely President Abdel Fattah as-Sisi, President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, who welcomed to support this conference generously in recognition of your leading role in calling for peace, freedom, citizenship and coexistence among people. Furthermore, I would like to thank our honored guests, our esteemed public, all colleagues, students and employees who dedicated themselves to organize this conference and I hope it gains your satisfaction. Lastly, I apologize to our foreign and domestic guests for any failure on our part to serve you perfectly.

Translated from Arabic to English at WOAG in Cairo by Sorraya Aziz and Samira Sakr.



## الإمام الأكبر خلال مؤتمر "الحرية والمواطنة... التنوع والتكامل":

- من المحزن والمؤلم ، تصويرُ الدِّين وكأنه أداة سحقت بها أجساد الأبرياء
- الشردمة الشاردة عن نهج الدين أوشكت على أن تُجشَّشَ العالمَ كُلَّهُ ضِدَّ الإسلام
- المتأمل المنصف في ظاهرة الإسلاموفوبيا لا تخطئ عيناه الكيلَ بمكيالين بين المحاكمة العالمية للإسلام من جانب وللمسيحية واليهودية من جانب آخر
- إذا لم تعمل المؤسسات الدينية في الشرق والغرب معاً للتصدي للإسلاموفوبيا ، فإنها سوف تطلق أشرعتها نحو المسيحية واليهودية إن عاجلاً أو آجلاً
- تبرئة الأديان من الإرهاب لم تعد تكفي ويجب علينا النزول بمبادئ الأديان وأخلاقياتها إلى الواقع المضطرب



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