

A speech delivered in Sage Chapel, Cornell University on the invitation of the Senate Sub-Committee for lecture.

## THE UNIVERSALITY OF ISLAM

by Ahmad Totonji

My topic today is the universality of Islam. This topic, I think, is very significant especially in this month of fasting (Ramadan) and in the light of the verses from the Qur'an which I have read to you. The name of the religion itself indicates the universality of the faith. Islam is an Arabic word meaning peace or submission to the will of God, and any person who submits himself to the will of God is a Muslim by definition. Therefore, I am sure in this gathering we will find many of you who have truly submitted yourselves to the will of God and are Muslims without knowing it. Anyone who submits himself to the will of God, he or she is a Muslim. Therefore, the words like "Mohammedans" or "Mohammedanism" have no place in our religion. These terms were coined in Europe during the Dark Ages, when there was very little knowledge of Islam: "Mohammedans," as though we worship Muhammad; and Muhammad-anism," as though it is the religion founded by Muhammad, but it is the religion of all humanity and for all times.

It is no wonder that we have this continuity of the Divine message in our belief. One of the verses which I read (Qur'an 2:136) said, 'We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and in the Books given to Moses, Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between one and the other among them, and to God we bow our will in Islam.' We believe in all the Divine messages which have come to mankind throughout history, starting from Adam and ending with Muhammad. They are all prophets of God to us and we accept all of them as great men who were sent by God. We make no distinction between them. This continuity or unity of the message emanates from the one central idea of Islam: the unity of God, the absolute Oneness of God. Listen to the words of the Qur'an: "Say He is God, the One and Only. God the Eternal, Absolute. He begetteth not, nor is He begotten, and there is none like unto Him." (112:1-4). This, in fact, is a whole chapter from the Qur'an, emphasizing the absolute unity of God, associating nothing with Him whatsoever. That is the essence of the entire belief of the Muslims: there is no God but one God and Muhammad is a messenger of God.

The concept of the unity of mankind derives from that belief; we make no distinction between people on the basis of color, on the basis of national origin, on the basis of sex, or any other trivial considerations which have come to separate man and man. One of the other verses which I read says: "O mankind, We created you from a single pair, a male and a female and made

you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other -- not that ye may despise each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous of you. God has full knowledge and is well acquainted with all things." (Qur'an 49:13). It did not say that the differentiation between man and man, or between human beings, is whether they call themselves Muslims or Christians or Jews. It did not say whether they are black, white, yellow, or green. It did not say whether they are males or females. The only characteristic which it set was the one who is most righteous. That is the only criterion in Islam of differentiation between human beings: the one who is most righteous, who is willing to submit himself more fully to the will of this One God. There has never been any distinction among the Muslims on the basis of color, national origin, or any of such considerations. And I am sure, so long as Muslims live in this world, they will not have this distinction between them. In fact, some of the very early converts to Islam in the time of Muhammad were of very different origins: Bilal from Ethiopia, a black man; Shuaib from the Roman Empire in Mecca; Salman, a Persian who was living there, and also people from among the noblest families of Arabia.

The unity of God, the unity of mankind and the unity of the message are all the basic core and fundamental teachings of Islam. From what I have so far said, it is quite clear that we do not need any intercessors between ourselves and our Lord. There is no one who is better than I, or you, for that matter, if we follow the one criterion which God has established, and that is righteousness. There is no need for anyone to stand between us and God. Our relationship with God is direct. We pray to Him five times a day; this is a constant reminder to us about our Creator, in the morning, noon, afternoon, evening and night. The God-conscious society which Islam tries to build is the kind of society which will remove all prejudices between man and man. And the universality of it will certainly be clear.

As Muslims, we are fortunate that the message of Islam, which is preserved in the Qur'an, was preserved more faithfully than any other scripture. Not only was the Qur'an written down in the time of Muhammad himself, as it was revealed to him -- we believe that the Qur'an comprises the actual words of God revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel -- but it was also learned by heart. Today, even in 1971, there are hundreds and thousands of people all over the world who read the Qur'an in its original language from first word to the last, by heart. There is no other book which has been so well memorized throughout history and even today. This was a double check on the Qur'an being preserved in its actual form, as it was

revealed to Muhammad. This way, whenever we have any differences of opinion or interpretation, we can always go back to the original, and that applies not only to me perhaps, as an Arab, or to you as an American, or an African or any other nationality, but to every human being in the world. Anyone can come and challenge someone else who gives a certain injunction from the Qur'an. He can say, "Well, if you go to the original book, it will say like this...." We have that criterion for judgment, and it is not a possession of any particular person, nation or tribe.

I am sure many of you will hear another word which is so common whenever you are studying about Islam, the word Hadith or Sunnah. The Hadith are the actual utterances of Muhammad. They have also been preserved to a certain extent, but not in the same form as the Qur'an, and the Hadith do not have the same importance as the Qur'an. Hadith is a collection of the sayings of Muhammad, whereas the word Sunnah refers to what the Prophet Muhammad did, what he said and what he approved his companions doing. These are examples of the practical applications of the Qur'an in the lives of human beings. Islam is a religion for human beings, and it aspires to make human beings better human beings. It is not for them to imitate God, but they imitate a human being whose life exemplifies the message of the Qur'an. Muhammad many times declared, "I am but a human being like you."

The concept of worship in Islam may be quite new to some of our brothers and sisters in this gathering. We do not have any separation between religion and state, that is, we make no separation between the spiritual life and the physical life. All of it is one, and directed by the same message of God with no distinction between the two, no dichotomy between these separate parts, if we may call them so. In Medina, one day when Muhammad was asked what was an act of worship, he replied, "Every action which a human being does with the intention to please his Lord is an act of worship." Then one of the companions immediately fired the second question at him. He asked, "O Prophet of God, even if a person sleeps with his wife, it will be an act of worship, and he will be rewarded for it? He said, "Yes, indeed, even if he sleeps with his wife it will be an act of worship and he will be rewarded for it. Don't you know that if he does the same act outside the marriage limits, he will be punished for it, and he will be displeasing God?" Even this kind of thing, which has come to be looked down upon by many people, is an act of worship in Islam, if it is done within the marriage limits. Sex, in Islam, is not something to be ashamed of; it is in fact something to be proud of. God has created this instinct in us, whether we like it or not, but He has regulated this instinct and the only way it can be used for the Muslims is within the marriage limits, because Islam aspires to create a pure society, a society which dignifies man -- and dignifies woman as well.

The first verse of Quran which I read (2:177) clearly indicates this comprehensiveness in the Islamic concept of worship. It reads: "It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards east or west."

Many times people say, "Muslims -- oh yes, you turn yourselves to the Kaaba." It is not the direction which is important; what matters is the concept of one direction for all humanity, regardless of where you are -- whether you are in Indonesia, whether you are in Japan, whether you are in Ceylon, whether you are in Arabia, or in the United States, or in Africa. We all turn in prayer towards one direction and it is that direction which is important as typical of united effort. The particular area is not the most significant thing but it is significant that in prayer Muslims all face one spiritual center, the Kaaba. The verse continues: "But it is righteousness to believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers and spend for the sake of God."

This is the concept of righteousness in Islam. It does not have any bearing on race; it does not have any bearing on nationality or any country of origin. Islam has set this concept of righteousness for all humanity and following it has created a God-conscious society which acknowledges this criterion for righteousness and no other -- our own desires, for instance.

I am sure many of you have heard about the Five Pillars of Islam. In this brief presentation it will not be easy for me to go into the details, but I will give you certain aspects or dimensions of them, to give you a feeling of what they mean to Muslims.

The prayers in Islam: We stand in prayers in front of God. We bow to Him and then we finally prostrate to God. We stand out of respect for the Presence of God; in bowing we display submission, and total submission to God is demonstrated when we go into prostration with our hands and face touching the ground. We do not merely submit ourselves to the will of God physically, but also mentally. On the other hand, we do not just submit ourselves mentally, but physically as well. There is no dichotomy between faith and action. When a group of Muslims comes together to pray they choose a leader among themselves, the best one among them. This idea of "We have to choose our leaders" is a very important thing, and I am sure many nations have taken and found it the most convenient way of ruling themselves.

In the daily prayers which we perform is the example that, after choosing a leader we follow him, so far as he follows the commandments of God. If he deviates, it is not only recommended that the others should correct him, but it is obligatory on them if they know what they should correct. How much a better world it would be if we all had the courage to correct our leaders when we see things wrong in them, rather than going astray. I left my country when I was 17 and went to England. I wanted to reflect on the prayers. I said, "Why am I Praying?" And while I was reflecting on these prayers, it came to my mind that certainly it is the best way in which man may feel the presence of God. I do not commit adultery in front of my father, in front of my mother, in front of my wife.

Why would I commit it in front of God, Who is the Creator of my father, mother, wife and all humanity? This kind of God-conscious relationship is characteristic of the kind of society which we aspire to build. I do not tell a lie to my dearest people; would I tell a lie in front of God, Who is seeing us and watching us?

#### The Concept of Fasting in Islam:

This is indeed a method of self-restraint and of calling to remembrance all human beings, reminding us that there are people who are less fortunate than we are in the world. By fasting we can feel how they feel when they are hungry, when they are thirsty. We consider: Are we really going to apply ourselves to alleviate the sufferings of the other human beings in the world? A Muslim is supposed to give at least 2½ percent of his earnings to the poor and needy every year, according to certain categories of needs which are explained in the Qur'an. But the assistance is for anyone who is in need. It happened in history that in the time of one of the Caliphs, Umar ibn Abdul-Aziz, there were no poor people to receive this charity, which Muslims call Zakat. But at that time there were many slaves in those countries and he ordered his men, "Collect all this Zakat and set free all the slaves you can find." This is also a form of universality, liberating man from the worship of man to the worship of the One God.

Pilgrimage in Islam: From the time of Muhammad until now -- about 1400 years -- millions of Muslims from all over the world assemble yearly in one place. In fact, last year there were about a million and a half people who gathered in one place (Mecca) for worship. They went to this place not because an invitation was sent to them by anyone, not because their travelling expenses were paid, not because they were going to get some comfort there -- in fact, many of them went through a lot of difficulties during this time. It was to demonstrate to mankind that they are all one family, that there is no distinction between them, not only theoretically, but also practically. When I performed a pilgrimage in 1965 there were Muslims there of 89 different nationalities, from countries between which there are no diplomatic relations at all and from countries which were at war with one another. People were coming together, participating in united worship, wearing garments made of just two pieces of unsewn cloth, this plain dress signifying they are all the same in the sight of God, no matter what their worldly position -- whether they are kings or janitors, princes or commoners; whether they are Africans, Asians, Europeans or Americans.

These are the kinds of feelings which Islam tries to build among the nations of the world. And if we try to apply ourselves fully to this, for sure, our lives could be different.

It will not be fair to close my remarks without saying something about a few myths which have been propagated about Islam and the Muslims. One is that Islam is spread by the sword. I always remember whenever I used to meet some new people they would say, "Oh, you are a Muslim -- you marry four wives, and you spread your religion by the sword." I have never heard in history any myth more tenacious than that of the spreading of the religion of Islam by the sword. When the Prophet Muhammad proclaimed Islam in Mecca, he was tortured. All his companions were tortured. They were put under the severest tortures which any man can experience, and history testifies to this, whether it is written by Muslims or non-Muslims. The Muslims were not even allowed to defend themselves. They went to Mecca; then they ran away from Mecca to Medina. When they were there, they still were not safe. An army of 1,000 people from Mecca came to annihilate them. The Muslims could not raise more than 313 people altogether to come and stand in front of these people.

In Islam we do not believe in the formula "If someone smacks you on the right cheek, turn to him the left." We believe that if someone smacks you on the right cheek, smack him on the right cheek. But, if you forgive, it is better, and a person forgives from the point of strength, not from the point of weakness. When I know that I can retaliate but refrain for the sake of forgiveness, it speaks of the greatness in man. The Muslims had to defend themselves and they were victorious. The next time an attempt was made to destroy them, they were again victorious. Muslims will fight when they are attacked; they will not sit still waiting to be annihilated. We can go throughout history and see the reasons for which the Muslims were at war. I'm not saying that they were angels, that they never committed wrongs. In 1400 years, any human beings will commit wrongs. But as a rule, certainly, it was different.

Now, many of you perhaps are not even interested in past history. You do not know even the names of these battles; Badr, Uhud, Hunain, and so on. Then look at what is happening today, in Africa for example. By the admission of many of the missionaries and by Time and other magazines, for every one person who is becoming Christian in Africa, nine people are becoming Muslims. Yet we do not have any organized missionaries. How does this happen? Do we have the sword in our hands in Africa? Not at all. In fact, in many countries where the Muslim population is more than 75 percent, they are ruled by the non-Muslims. Nigeria is a very good example. Chad is another example, and I

could quote many. Then how is it that Islam is spreading like this? It is the simplicity of Islam, which appeals to the humblest minds in the jungles as well as to the most sophisticated minds in the highest institutions of learning. Today in the United States, hundreds are accepting Islam. We do not have the sword in our hands.

The other myth I think is very appealing, and perhaps not so serious as the matter of war, and that is about polygamy. "Do you Muslims marry more than one?" Yes. It is not required that a Muslim marry more than one and Islam emphasizes monogamy very much. But Islam is also a practical religion, as you have seen. It is a religion which faces the challenges right on. It does not avoid them. Whenever there are circumstances in which it becomes necessary to marry more than one, Islam has allowed it. After the First World War and Second World War in Germany alone there were two million girls of the ages 17 up to 22 who did not have any spouses. What do you do with these girls? Send them to the streets, as it happened? No. Islam dignifies woman more than that. It respects woman more than that. It does not send them to the streets. It says that if the girl agrees and if the boy agrees, there is a solution for them. It says that human needs must be fulfilled; if not fulfilled legally they will be fulfilled illegally. And you cannot avoid it. What is the answer of the other religions? We know what happened in Germany. There are other circumstances which I could go into, but I think our time is becoming short.

Islam is a religion which appeals to the minds of all people who are searching for truth and it is not something for which they must make a change; they are born with the inclination toward Islam (submission to the will of God). They have submitted themselves to the will of God, whether they like it or not. Their body has by nature submitted itself to the will of God, because it grows in accordance with the laws of God. They cannot help it. And the same thing is possible with their minds: they can also submit these to the will of God, but consciously, and we will have a better society, a better human being, and a better world for us to live in.

Wasalamu Alaikum.