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TO WHERE AFRICA?
AFRICA, THE WORLD, THE ARABS AND ISLAM

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There was a time, not long ago in the history of mankind, when people thought that the earth is flat. That was part of some circles' confirmed belief. To say that the earth is round was not only to go against the perceived knowledge and wisdom of the day but also to blaspheme against the accepted belief and warrant excommunication from the church of Christ. Thus was the fate of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) because he agreed with Copernicus (1473-1543) that the earth is round and that the earth as well as all the other planets circle around the sun and around themselves. But the Quran taught Muslims early in the seventh century that the earth is round not like a ball but more so like an egg. And that it does revolve around itself as well as circles around the sun, hence the night and day and the seasons.

And there was a time, not long ago in human history, when the earth was seen as regions, seven regions, not as continents. Up to the time of the Age of Discoveries (1492 and after), the Classical World knew next to nothing of the New World across the Atlantic Ocean in the West, or Australia and New Zealand in the Far East, across the Pacific Ocean. Of course these were all along there and are as old as the Classical World. But they were not discovered and were thus unknown. It is true that some manuscripts of Arabic navigational maps from the Maghreb in N. Africa speak of the Atlantic Ocean as the Sea of Darkness, Bahr al-Zulumat, and Al-Mariqa (America?). It is an accepted fact that the discoveries in the East and the West could not have been accomplished the way they happened without the full use of Arabic knowledge of sea-fairing, ship-building and navigational skills. Words like
arsenal (dar al-sana), admiral (amir al-bahr), cable (habl) amongst others tell the tale.

Even after the Great Discoveries and the advancement that Arab geographers and astronomers made in the fields of geography and astronomy, over and above what they learned from Greeks, the Romans, the Persians and the Indians, it took the world quite a time before it advanced from regional geography to continental geography.

There was also a very long time when what came to be known as the continent of Africa was part of the landmass of what came to be known as the continent of Asia. The Red Sea is a rift valley. Moreover but for the digging of the Suez Canal in the last nineteenth century, connecting the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, a land bridge connected the two continents via Egypt by way of Sinai throughout their known history. Thus the movement of peoples, animals, commerce, and cultures across the two continents has been as it still is an on going process from ancient times. Throughout human history peoples of Africa played an important and significant role in the progress of religions, cultures and civilizations. Indeed some reliable scientific discoveries take Africa to be the cradle of man. In the classical world the role of the Nile Valley Civilizations in Nubia and Egypt was important to the development of world civilizations as the role of the civilizations of the Twin Rivers in Iraq, of Athens and Sparta in Greece, of India, of China, of the Incas in America and other known or unknown civilizations of the world.

For a very long time, throughout the known history of the Mediterranean world in ancient, medieval and a good part of modern times the name of Ifriqiyya, that is Africa, was but the name of a defined administrative region in N. Africa, covering present-day Tunisia. From Roman times up to Abbasid and Fatimid times, Ifriqiyya was Tunisia. About the origin of the
name sources differ. Some sources (I.E.) claim it was so called after the colony founded by the Roman Emperor Titus Africanus. Here one notes that the emperor was named after the place and not vice versa. Some Arabic sources claim that it was so called after the colony founded by Ifriqish, the Hamyarite prince who was the first to establish a colony there. This seems more plausible as the colony was named after its founder, which was a common practice in the past (e.g. Rome, Alexandria, Constantinople, Al-Mahdiyya etc.). Thus before the European expansion and colonization of the African continent and its division amongst the colonial powers, the African per se was the Tunisian. To the Europeans that person was black. So were all the Moors of N. Africa. “Black a Moor” as the English used to say.

Seeing the world as continents did not end seeing it as regions; regional geography still has and will continue to have its place in the study of the globe. However with the rise of imperialism as a staunch arm of capitalism, politics began to have its role. Geo-politics became the mirror on which the globe is to be seen. As the name of the defined region in N. Africa, Ifriqiyya, gradually established itself as the name of the whole continent the African gradually came to mean people of sub-Saharan Africa. In their diabolical designs to rule, the colonial powers divided the continent into two major parts, Africa north of the Sahara and Africa south of the Sahara. The Sahara is presented as a formidable barrier, separating the countries and the peoples of the North of Africa from those south of the Sahara. But history in the past and the present shows otherwise. Movements of peoples, trade, languages, religions and cultures have been and continue to be the norm and not the exception. What the colonial powers succeeded in doing was not only to create politics and economic spheres of interest tied to their own home policies and economic interests but also to strive to create new ethnic, religious and cultural identities all over the continent. Each country was to be a tower
of Babel where the indigenous languages are relegated to no place and the colonial language was presented as he only lingua franca in every place. Only Arabic, Swahili and Hausa succeeded to save themselves from the colonial onslaught. But even these three indigenous African languages lost the bond that bound them for generations, namely the Arabic alphabet. In their fight against Arabic, Arabs and Islam, the colonial powers took many restrictive measures including the abolition of the Arabic script and the latinization of many indigenous script and languages.

It is important in this respect to stress that Africa has been part of the Arab homeland since time immemorial. The traditional homeland of the Semites, the most important of whom are the Arabs, stretch from the Iranian Plateau right across Western Asia through the land bridge of Sinai up to the Atlantic coast. Nor was the Red-Sea a barrier against the movement of peoples, animals, trade, religions and cultures from the coasts of Arabia to the coasts of Africa and vice versa. A cradle of the Arab people and the Arabic language, Africa has also been a cradle of Islam. Even before the migration to Medina Muslims took refuge in Ethiopia with the Christian Negus of the time. Shortly before that the Ethiopians led by Abraha, having already taken control of Yemen, were marching to take the Holy Sanctuary of Mecca. That took place around the year 570-71, the very year in which the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was born. When the Caliphate under Abu Bakr and Umar had to defend itself against the Byzantines in Syria and Egypt and succeeded in driving them out of these two important provinces, succeeding caliphs especially the Umayyads (661-750 AD) had to carry on across Tunisia, N. Africa, and crossing over the Gibraltar to occupy Spain for centuries to come. In all this while the Caliphate had to defend itself and expand by the dint of power, the sword. Islam the religion spread by the word.
“Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error” (Quran II, 256). One does not need to labour this fact despite what the present Pope wants people to believe. One has simply to compare the history of and place of Christianity and Christians, and Judaism and Jews in the Quran and the Muslim world during the heydays of the Caliphate and Muslim Civilization with the fate of Muslims and Jews in Spain and the Levant during the Inquisition and the Crusades to see who were the intolerant and who sanctioned the brutal massacres of thousands upon thousands of innocent peoples. And now the barbaric invasion of Muslim countries in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and other places are made in the name of fighting terrorism and spreading democracy. In the process there is the talk of a “clash of civilizations”, the projection of all Muslims as terrorists and vandals and the projection of Islam as an intolerant religion spread by the sword. But all these pretexts are false; the arguments underlying them are equally false and are as naked of truth as Pharaoh was of the magical robes despite the exclamations of his entourage of how beautiful the robes were!

Africans, states, peoples, religions and cultures have a lot of stakes in all that is being said about Muslims and Islam, and is being done to Muslims and Islam in Africa itself and throughout the world. This is because just as the bonds of brotherhood, of faith and humanity count to the Christians, and Christian U.S. and Europe now behave as if they are the sole arbiters of the present day world, so too these bonds do count to all Muslims all over the world. The declared crusade that is being waged against Islam and Muslims in Africa, Asia and Europe as part of the justification of the Euro-American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the usurpation of Palestine by Israel is in fact a repeat of the Crusades that accompanied the first millennium.

There is no denying of the fact that the world millennium to our Christian brothers means more than a count of the years
that passed since the assumed date of the birth of the Prophet Isa (p.b.u.h.). The Book of Revelation of the New Testament speaks of the second coming of the Messiah after the millennium as being heralded by the revival of the State of Israel, which even spells doomsday, the Apocalypse or the catastrophic end of the world. Under the impact of this prophecy, which proved to be false after the first millennium, the Papacy led the Crusaders to the Holy Lands. Just as is the case now, the declared purpose was to save the Holy Places in preparation for the Return of Jesus Christ (p.b.u.h.); the real aim of the princes, the kings, the emperors, the popes and others was to acquire land and wealth in the Levant. As sure as that Crusade ended in failure, the present-day Crusade of Bush and Blair, with the present-day Holy Sea not so subtly giving cause for the barbarity of the Euro-American Coalition forces, will end in failure. Truth will out. Justice will prevail.

The concern of Africa and the Africans in this global struggle is multifold. A cradle of Muslims and Islam, Africa is also a cradle of the Arabs. Africa has the largest number of Arabs in the world in Egypt and right across N. Africa. The Sudanic Belt stretching from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean is greatly arabized, with many Arab tribes spreading across it. The Arabic language ranks as the most spread, most spoken and most read in the continent. Its sister languages, Hausa, Swahili and Fulfulde are loaded with Arabic loan words and are full of Islamic terms and concepts. The influence of Islam and these languages go beyond African Muslims to all other Africans. Africa therefore cannot but play its role in the defence of Islam and Muslims. It is simply self-defence, which is not only legitimate and laudable but is also essential for survival.

With their God-given qualities of fortitude, patience, and humility, and with their great love for the truth, Africans will find out that in their past Islam was not spread by the sword or the gun but by the word. It did not penetrate the continent
across the Sahara or across the sea to the eastern coasts of the continent right to the south and centre, with any invading armies or in the wake of colonial occupation. Nor did it have in its belief or culture anything that promotes racism, exploitation or disrespect for Biblical revelations or Biblical prophets. Of the three Biblical religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, Islam is the only one that recognizes and respects the other two as part of the faith that takes Islam to be the religion of all Prophets from Adam, Abraham, to Moses, to Jesus and to Muhammad (p.b.u.h.). One does not need to mention what the Christians did to the Jews or what the Jews did to the Christians, of what the Jews said about the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ.

What Muslims say about Jesus, Mary, Moses and other Prophets is part of their faith. What Christians and Jews say about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad is part of their culture. It is their common Greco-Roman, Judaco-Christian culture which is bedevilled with many evil genes that resulted in the horrors which were brought about by Facism, Nazism, Zionism, the horrors and disgrace of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the Colour Bar, Apartheid, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Usurpation of Palestine, and the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan with Abu Ghuraib and Guantanamo. The outstanding feature of the Euro-American-Israeli foreign policy is the arrogant and utter disregard of human rights, peoples' right and international laws.

It is perhaps sobering to remind the Pope that the church was always an integral part of European expansion, and that wherever the European went the indigenous populations suffered from the results of these evil cultural genes. This was the case in the Americas, in Australia, in New Zealand as well as in Asia and Africa. The church is not only a witness to what is happening in Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan, the wanton killing and destruction but the representatives of the Holy Sea and the Archbishop of Canterbury, are there with the troops as
part of the army. Had the European expansion been inspired by any sense of caring and sharing not oppression and exploitation the world could have been a very different place. The tragedy is that all indications show that America and Europe in particular are out to dictate, exploit and dominate; their world is a world where they should always be more equal than others.

It is for us Africans to shun those evil cultures. It is for the Muslim Africans to be foremost in striving for the unity of the continent in its plurality and diversity. Ethnicity and faith must be seen in the context of the nation, the country must be seen in the context of the region, the region in the context of the continent in an ever-changing world. Muslims have a duty to remember that the great bequest given to them by Allah, the Quran, practiced and expounded in the traditions of the prophet (p.b.u.h.), is not for them alone. As it was first revealed through the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) to non-Muslim Arabs to guide them to Islam, so it is the case now in regard to non-Muslims. Muslims have to endeavour to spread the word of the Quran to non-Muslims in respect and good faith. The Quran contains many verses that are addressed to mankind in general. Many are addressed to the peoples of the Books. All of it is of course addressed to Muslims who share humanity and the Books with the rest. In this age where a clash of cultures is imposed upon Muslims by way of abuse, aggression, destabilization and destructive chaos, it is for the Muslims to look with great confidence to their faith, their Prophet, their Book and their future. Africans of the North Africa and Egypt should look more to the rest of the continent in the south and identify themselves more with its peoples, its problems and its cultures. Those in the south should look more to the whole continent and its peoples and its potential, not across it to the colonial countries whose intentions to dominate and exploit are as clear as they were in the past. All indigenous peoples of Africa are de facto Africans. The Arabs, the Berber, the Nubians, the Beja, the Tuareg, the Ethiopians, the Eritreans, the Somalis are as

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indigenous Africans as the Zaqawa, the Fur, the Dinke, the Zanda or Zulu and Bantu and others. Islam, which does not ignore the region or the tribe, stresses more the bond of humanity and calls for mutual recognition and understanding. It is for Muslims of Africa to adhere to the divine call

"O Mankind, we created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know (and recognize) each other (not that you may ignore or despite each other); verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you" (Quran 49, 13).

Africa is a continent, not a region or a tribe. Islam is a universal religion. Islam, the last of the Biblical religions, is the first and final of divine religions. In the Quran, all Prophets were Muslims, and Islam in its successive revelations from the Prophet Adam to the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was the only religion before Allah, the complete and unequivocal submission to Him, Most high. But according to the Quran the diversity of tongues, colours, beliefs and cultures are part of Allah’s scheme of things. Muslims in Africa as well as over the world should be the first to recognize and appreciate this fact. They should not be intolerant to others as some others are intolerant, abusive and provocative to them. The Quran says, “Those who patiently persevere will truly receive a reward without measure” (39, 10).

Sadly it is true that a number of Muslim states, Muslim organizations, Muslim groups and Muslim individuals in Africa, Asia, Europe, America and elsewhere sometimes do things which are utterly un-Islamic, in human and irresponsible, in the name of Islam. But fortunately the voices of moderate, mainstream Islam are always loud and clear in condemning such acts. African Muslims, to enhance their position as the
cementing factor in African societies and African states, should stick to this moderate, mainstream Sunni Islam with the Maliki school of jurisprudence as their main source, after the Quran and the Traditions, for the Sharia. African Muslims should be proud of the fact that in Africa, in Egypt, Tunisia, N. Africa, in Nigeria, in Sudan, the Maliki school found homes to develop and predominate all over the continent (cf. Ibn Farhun: Al0-Dibaj). Egypt was also a second home for the Shafi'i school. It is a relevant tolerant, logical, reasonable, open-minded and progressive fiqh and Sharia, which are the primary qualities of the Muslim Faith, that the four main Muslim schools of jurisprudence advocate. For African Muslim that is the way. There is no difficulty or contradiction in being Muslim and African while being a member of any tribe or a citizen of any State.

Numbers of Muslims in the Americas, in Europe, in Asia, in Australia in New Zealand and in Africa increase every day. So Muslims in Africa and elsewhere have nothing to fear about Islam. But they have a lot to fear about themselves. In his Clash of Civilizations Huntington says that for the U.S.A. to survive it has to have an enemy; if there is no enemy then one must be created, he states. At this stage of human history the enemy for the Zionist and Christian fundamentalist circles in the U.S., Europe and Israel is Islam and therefore the Muslims. Not only the wayward extremist Muslims who are disavowed and condemned by the moderate and broad masses of the Muslims but also the moderate, peaceful and law-abiding Muslims.

However attacks on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) are of no avail. Both are invincible. But Muslim peoples and Muslim countries are not. Attacks on Islam and the slanders on the Prophet serve three purposes: first to identify the enemy as Islam and justify the wars against it; second to provoke Muslims to react and give further justification for the attacks on Muslims; and third to rally the Christians around the
church and the states in their attacks against Islam and Muslims. In reality the aim of the U.S.A., the U.K., and Europe is to control and exploit the Muslim world and as much of the Third World as possible. In the coming confrontation between the West and the emerging super power, China, control of Muslim countries is both for their wealth and their position. Africa is a big bone in this contention. It is wealthy. It is strategic. It is Islamic in its majority.

However even at this very time when the attacks on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) are unabated, many in the U.S.A. and Europe speak highly of Islam, the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and contributions of the Islamic civilization to the present-day civilization.

Islam is not a nationality. Muslims can be full citizens of non-Islamic states or countries. Equally non-Muslims can be full citizens of Islamic states or countries. In both situations Muslims must strive to integrate and identify themselves with their societies, their countries and their nations. In our ancient yet newly emerging continent of Africa this integration and identification is crucial. We have had enough of wars and divisions. It is time to identify and integrate. It is the duty of all Africans, be they black, brown or “white” Muslims, Christians or others to identify with the past, the present and the future of the whole continent. Muslim Africans who are the majority in the continent have a lot to proclaim and be proud of in this endeavour. Egypt and N. Africa, Nubian ad Axium stand very high in the scale of classical civilizations. Muslims of Egypt and N. Africa contributed a lot to the present day.

The civilization which came out of the Renaissance of Europe the real masters of which were Muslim scholars from Egypt, Tunisia, and N. Africa. Muslim scholars like Ibn Khaldun, Ibn al-Wazzan (Leo Africanus), Ibn Sa’id, Al-Idrisi, Ibn Batuta, Ibn Jubair and many others are Africans. The
culture of Muslim Spain, which gave Europe the fruits of the minds of Ibn Ruishd (Averros), Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Tufail is very much related to Muslim N. Africa. And it was the African slaves of the Atlantic Slave trade, and many of these were Muslims, who are the true heroes of America’s wealth and power.

With the Maliki school of jurisprudence as their main source, after the Quran and the Traditions, for the Sharia, African Muslims should be proud of the fact that Africa has been the second home of the Maliki School which was rooted in Medina. Most of the famous disciples of Imam Maliki lived in Egypt and all over N. Africa (c.f. Ibn Farhun; al-Dibadj). The school was developed to maturity in Africa and now predominates all over the continent especially in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan and Nigeria.

Africa was also a second home for the Shafi'i School. Both schools, the Maliki and Shafi'i, are logical, reasonable, tolerant, open-minded and progressive. These qualities are shared with the other two main schools, the Hanbiliite and Hanafite. These are the true qualities of the Muslim faith. For the African Muslims that is the way. There is absolutely no contradiction in being a good Muslim, a good African while being a member of a particular tribe or a system of any state.

It was the African Muslim states who first bore the brunt of defending the continent against the European scramble for Africa. Throughout the continent’s confrontation with colonial powers and in all the continent’s movements of liberation, Muslims contributed a lot in defending their countries and liberating them from the yoke of colonization. The Dan Fodios of Sokoto (1804-1903 AD), the Mahdi of Sudan and the Mahdi of Somalia are the forerunners of Jomo Kenyata of Kenya, Ben Bella of Algeria and Mandella of S. Africa. Moreover the Dan Fodios of Sokoto left a great legacy of Islamic learning in many
scholarly works and chancery literature. Of superb quality, diversity, depth and dimensions, these works are very relevant to the Muslims of Africa today who are engaged in state building and national rejuvenation.

Is it not time for the preparation of a "magnum opus" on Muslims in Africa to help the continent know itself and where it is going?