Extract from a Speech by John Ralston Saul to the "Reviving the Islamic Spirit" Convention

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Let me begin with a practical matter. You could even call it a local matter. We live in a city which, depending on where you draw the borders, contains up to eight million people. And yet, until very recently, there has been no place to train Islamic or Judaic religious leaders: in fact, no place anywhere in Canada. My understanding is that Victoria College at the University of Toronto is about to launch such a training centre, which is extremely good news.

The point I want to make is this. Toronto is a cutting-edge city when it comes to diversity and pluralism. This is also true of Vancouver, Montreal, Calgary, and other Canadian cities. Indeed, it is true of Canada as a whole. Some fifty percent of those who live in Toronto were not born in Canada. If you include the previous generation, that number would probably rise to seventy percent. I say all of this as the co-chair of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, which works to include new Canadians in the work of citizenship as rapidly and as fully as possible.

The second related point I want to make is this. The great religions are indeed universal. However, there are many interpretations of these religions, and most of those interpretations are regional and local. They are a point of view. That doesn't necessarily mean they're right or wrong, good or evil. It simply means that different people come at the universal religious texts and give them a point of view which is appropriate to their place.

It is often said, and rightly, that support for pluralism is not something which pops out naturally in human society. It's something we all have to work on. We have to work on it every day. And this is particularly important in Canada, given that we are on the cutting-edge of pluralism and diversity. We have to work hard to educate ourselves about how pluralism works. And we have to work hard to educate others, in order to help them understand how Canada functions.

The obvious point that follows is this. Up until today, the totality of the Islamic and Judaic religious leaders has been trained elsewhere. They cannot help but come to Canada with a point of view which is appropriate in some way to those societies in which they were formed.

What I'm saying is not a criticism of them. Quite the contrary. It is a very tough assignment to ask somebody who has been trained in New York, Cairo, Jerusalem, or Tehran, to come to Canada and adjust their religious point of view to such a different society. We are asking a great deal from them, and I think in most cases they're doing their best.

Rather than seeing what I'm saying as a criticism, let's think about what we have been missing. If we are the cutting-edge society when it comes to pluralism and diversity, then we have been missing an astonishing opportunity to train religious leaders in two of the three Abrahamic religions so that they can emerge with a point of view which, quite naturally, is built upon our concepts of diversity and pluralism. And these of course are concepts which are deeply tied to people of different origins getting along together in an open and democratic manner. In other words, we have been missing, for a very long time, an opportunity to explain both to ourselves to ourselves and to the rest of the world. We have also been failing to assume the responsibility to explain ourselves to ourselves, and the rest of the world.

The severe question that needs to be asked, the question which is deeply critical, is why have public universities, which are the universities of all the citizens, satisfied themselves for so long with training only Christian leaders? In many ways, this conference, over the last nine years, has been filling part of the role that the public universities have not been assuming.

Why I do begin with this? Because making pluralism work is an existential and ethical challenge. And you can find guidance on pluralism, and on its existential and rational and ethical roots, within the aims of the Islamic Sacred Law. Specifically, you have only to look at the law which relates to the need to defend human dignity. And this in turn relates directly to the Ninth Commandment, not to bear false witness against your neighbour. In other words, pluralism and diversity are all about understanding and living with your neighbour,

which means showing respect, one for the other. The Tenth Commandment reinforces this idea: thou shalt not covet anything that belongs to thy neighbour. Again, it is about imagining *the other*, living together, and dignity and diversity as one.

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Now let me say a few words about freedom of expression. You have been told that I am President of PEN International. PEN is the original and still the leading voice around the world for freedom of expression. We have tens of thousands of writers belonging to 145 centres in over 100 countries. We try to get incarcerated writers out of prison. We are usually working on some 900 cases. But we are equally the only organized global voice for literature which is the inseparable other half of free expression.

Whenever a religion is created it involves a struggle for freedom of speech. There are other religious assumptions and rules in place. Then along comes Moses or Christ or Mohammed and a whole new interpretation is presented. From the historic point of view this is looked back on as a religious breakthrough. But if you look at it from outside the creation and establishment of each of the three Abrahamic religions, this was a remarkable exercise in freedom of expression. And in each case that freedom of expression included the establishment of remarkable new religious texts.

This exercise in openness is almost inevitably followed by generations of religious leaders who see themselves as the custodians of revealed truth and therefore empowered to limit freedom of expression, and to advance religious rules and laws in order to cause that limitation.

This is not surprising. In every domain free expression is a natural tool to those who create, and an annoyance to those who manage. We must always remind ourselves that it is the creators who are right. Without them, and their use of freedom of expression, these three religions would not exist.

Of course I understand that freedom of expression can be misused and cause pain. Such misuse can be dangerous to all of us. And there can be no doubt that Muslims have suffered from this misuse both in the colonial period and today. In fact we have seen, over the last decade in particular, a return of extreme language coming from some quarters in all three of the Abrahamic cultures. The result is that some leaders of each of the Abrahamic cultures call for limitations on free expression in order to protect their religions.

But this idea of "religious defamation" misses the key point. Religions are born of free expression. They grow thanks to free expression. And if public discourse is artificially limited there will always be unintended consequences. One of those unintended consequences is that irresponsible language is in fact encouraged, not discouraged.

The point is this: free expression works in the building of healthy societies. But it also carries an obligation for those who write and speak to do so responsibly – with a sense of public responsibility. Free expression brings people together. It must not be a tool for hatred, as clearly stated in the PEN Charter. Limiting free expression merely weakens the shared sense of public responsibility; of responsibility to *the other*.

We had an interesting example of this a few months ago. A Florida pastor called for the burning of the Koran. Some saw this as an example of why freedom of expression should be limited to protect religious dignity and public order. They were wrong. The more the pastor talked, and was talked about, the more isolated he became, the more ridiculous in the public eye. It wasn't simply that he was allowed to self-destruct by expressing himself. It was that citizens took up their responsibility and spoke out against him. This uncomfortable, disturbing exercise in free expression produced an important victory for the respect of Islam in the United States.

Here at this conference you are discussing the link between Islamic Sacred Law and the Ten Commandments. Well, this incident illustrated those Sacred Laws that call for the preservation of both intellect and human dignity. And it also illustrated the Commandments which state that no one should misuse God's name or bare false testimony against their neighbour.

As the great poet Rumi put it, “Human beings are discourse.” It is language, the use of language, that allows us to function. And Islam, with its clear call in the Sacred Laws for the preservation of rationality, and its evocation of the Greek and Aristotelian approach, could easily be a religious force that takes the lead in advancing the central role of free expression in building healthy societies

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Finally, let me move to one other issue. It is often thought, when people talk about the role of religion in society, that it comes down to fairly straightforward struggles; for example, a struggle between the state and a religion, or a struggle between a secular philosophy versus a religious philosophy, or a struggle between morality and the absence of religious rules.

My own feeling is that these are superficial and inexact ideas of what happens. The great elements in societal debates actually break up into three parts: ethics, spirituality and morality. The danger is that religious leaders often tend to mix these three elements together and to call it all morality, and suggest that there are problems of morality and then suggest that society’s problem come down to failures in morality. The conclusion is that these problems can therefore be solved through moral leadership – putting morality first. The tendency then is to interpret religious laws in all three of the Abrahamic religions through morality.

I had a look at the topics that you’ve been discussing, and I think it can be seen in quite a different way. You’ve talked about the truly worrying rise in pornography thanks to technology, and how this should be seen as a modern version of adultery. And yet, there is absolutely no sign in any of the three Abrahamic religions that strict leadership through morality has led to less use of pornography. In fact, as one of your speakers has pointed out, the statistics may indicate the exact opposite. I’m not taking a laissez-faire approach to this subject. I’m simply pointing out that strict moral leadership has not produced less consumption of pornography.

I also had a look at your session on Islamic economics. As you all know, Islamic theories, like pre-capitalist Christian theories, make a lot of sense today. You could say they've gone from being old-fashioned to being very modern. There are some very interesting ideas in the Islamic and early Christian theories regarding the role of debt, and what our attitude should be towards profiting from other people's debts. These ideas could not be more relevant.

There are two points worth making here. The first is that people need to know this about Islam. They need to know that Islam contains interesting theories about real economic activity versus building fortunes on the misfortunes of others.

Second, it would be very nice if an Islamic-led society were to set the example, by following the principles laid out in Islamic economics. I should add to that that it would be very nice if any society – with Islamic origins, or Christian origins, or Judaic origins – set the example by attempting to follow the economic rules set out in their religions.

The point here is that the failure that we see is not a failure of morals, it is a failure of ethics, and this is an ethical challenge. These are useful, dynamic theories with an ethical base, and they do need to be put forward.

There was a session on "honour thy parents". This is an essential element in the structure of societies – respect for elders. That phrase, respect for elders, carries with it the proviso that we must always be careful to separate honouring parents from the old tyranny of parents, which was such a problem in the experiences of all three of the Abrahamic faiths, and remains a problem to some extent today. The meaning of "honour thy parents" has to be seen in context; the context of belonging, and the context of love. It could be said that the best example we have today of societies which are able to express this idea of respecting elders – certainly in Canada – is that of Aboriginal society. Of course, there are examples of abuse, and there are many problems, but Aboriginal societies in Canada are very clear in their ability to enunciate the following: respect for place, and for community, is tied to the idea of family. And the idea of family is tied to respect for the elder. In other words, concepts of family are tied to respect for place, and therefore for the environment.

I think this is related to a specific Canadian question. If we ask ourselves what is the original Canadian conversation, the answer is very clear. The original Canadian conversation was one which took place between the First Nations – the people who were here – and the immigrants – the new Canadians. This conversation began in approximately 1600, and it went on in that structure for centuries. And that was for a very good reason. It was the Aboriginals who knew how to live here, and who had a welcoming idea of society and family and belonging. And so, the original Canadian conversation was about Aboriginals welcoming and helping new Canadians to survive and find their place here. The idea of the conversation was lost over the last century, and I believe very strongly that it needs to be re-launched. That's part of the work that the institute that I co-chair with Adrienne Clarkson does – the Institute for Canadian Citizenship.

My feeling is that we would all gain a great deal from the revival of the original conversation, the conversation between Aboriginals and new Canadians. And I think that Canadian Muslims can play a key role in helping this to happen. You heard earlier from Dr. Mattson about the circles of community. This fits exactly with the Aboriginal idea of communities as circles which can be expanded as people are welcomed in. This in turn is tied to the idea that we all come from the same parents, and therefore must find ways to understand and included each other.

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What is the general point that I'm making this afternoon? First, an example. I think we all agree that materialism is a major problem today, and that it is probably a moral problem. However, the solution to materialism is ethical and spiritual. The solution is not moral. In other words, ethics is a way of acting, and spirituality is a way of thinking. If you act and think in an ethical way, you will be heading in the direction of a moral attitude.

The six aims of Islamic Sacred Law are intentionally dynamic. Their relationship to the Ten Commandments reinforces both. What I am suggesting is that we need to think of this in ethical terms. We need to think of this in terms of

mercy, of empathy, of inclusion, of consideration, of anti-racism, of economic justice, of egalitarianism, of responsibility of place, of fair treatment of *the other*. Spirituality, after all, is the transcendental version of ethics. It can produce ethical action. It can certainly facilitate ethical action. And when this happens, it is likely that you will have encouraged some degree of moral purpose.

We were asked to come here today in order to talk about, and think about, how the six universal aims of Islamic Law can give purpose to your lives in relationship to the Ten Commandments. I think the answer is quite simple. If you lead with ethics and spirituality, then the rest will follow.

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