

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Your Highnesses, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me a great deal of pleasure to be here as the Director of HRH Prince Alwaleed Centre of Islamic Studies. This is an opportunity to pay tribute to the generosity that established the Centre. And to celebrate the vision that lies behind it.

So, Princess Ameerah, your Highness, I thank you and your husband. We know that in the midst of a fast-changing world, you have a long-standing commitment to independent research. We know that you believe in the benefits of a critical engagement. We want you to know that we share in your vision of sharing these goals as widely as possible.

We also want you to know what a wise choice you have made with the University of Cambridge. It is not just the name, or the history, or the glorious architecture. This university has a deep commitment to public engagement. It has a great deal of talent. And it has a great deal of valuable experience. It is a natural home for this endeavour that you are supporting.

There are important debates going on all around us. You do not have to look beyond the borders of this country to realise that debates about participation, citizenship, education and the place of religion in public life matter to us and to people all around us. They are not merely academic issues.

Your vision, and ours, is that the insight and energy of university life can contribute enormously to these debates. So we have two things in mind at the Alwaleed Centre of Islamic Studies. One is world-class research. The other is innovative public education. And because we are part of the University of Cambridge, we see these two as firmly connected. They mutually nourish each other.

Let me give you an example.

Over the last two years, we have been running a project called “Contextualising Islam in Britain”. This has brought together a group of British Muslims – activists, scholars, educationalists and religious leaders. They discussed what it means to live faithfully as a Muslim in Britain today from a position of deeply rooted citizenship. We let them set the terms of debate. The

resulting discussion covered human rights, gender, the Sharia, ethics, political participation, jihad, citizenship, gender, sexuality and more. I was privileged to chair it. It was a fascinating set of debates, and has already proved influential.

This project is only a small part of what we do at the Centre. But in some ways it encapsulates what we are about. Why do I say that? Well, the subject is a hot topic. It is an undeniably contentious area, because there are so many different voices, and different kinds of pressure.

To begin with, some Muslim leaders were cautious and some even stayed away. They had their own constituencies and reputations to worry about. But when the project got going, it started to work. The word went out that this is a forum that is capable of bringing many different voices together. It is a forum that bridges the divide between academics and practitioners, theologians and community activists. It is a forum that looks at real issues. It has scholarly credibility, and it can also reach out to the grassroots and bring them in. And so we grew, from twelve people in the first meeting, to double that in last symposium.

This was a time of perceived crisis in the Muslim community in Britain. For many people, that is a crisis that continues. But in the middle of that, this project was a real success. It brought together participants from a rich diversity of theological, ethnic and professional backgrounds. They talked to one another with growing confidence, mutual respect and trust, and good humour.

And out of it came a report. The House of Commons Select Committee praised it. They singled it out as a model of self-managed independent research. Other initiatives in Austria and the United States have learnt from it. Most pleasingly of all, in this financially stringent climate, we have secured more funds from the government for a second phase. And the participation in this new phase of the project has exceeded our expectations. Now we will take the discussion nationally, with a series of roadshows to engage the grassroots level. Our vision was never to sacrifice scholarship or intellectual integrity in order to make this project easy. One proof of that is that we are taking issues head-on, and are producing a full-length, fully-referenced report for the academic and scholarly community.

This is only one example of what we do. But it shows what we are about. To build trust. To bring different voices together. To speak beyond or through any perceived walls. To reach an audience of practitioners, policy makers, professionals, and scholars. To contribute ideas and evidence that can enrich the important debates that are going on around us, and that matter so much to people.

It is thanks to your generosity that we have been able to do this. And it is thanks to the welcoming support of the wider university. With your help, and Vice-Chancellor with your help, we will continue.

Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup>, March 2011