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Transcript of opening remarks by Provost Abdelal at the First International Conference on the Cultural Common Ground, December 28, 2006

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Speeches

The First International Conference on the Cultural Common Ground

Thursday, December 28, 2006

Cairo University

The Cultural Middle Ground

Opening Remarks by Ahmed Abdelal

It has never been more apparent than it is today the extent to which cultures around the world differ from one another. Modern systems of communication have made it possible for nations to scrutinize each other with a speed and clarity undreamt of just a few decades ago. Journalists thrive on telling the world about the cultural conflicts, civil and tribal wars, and boundary disputes that divide so many nations of the world today. Too often we focus our attention on cultural dichotomies when we could better be turning our attention to the idea that is the theme of this conference, The Cultural Middle Ground.

In the description of the subject of this conference that was sent to me is a reference to the book by Norman Daniels, *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image*, in which he argues that the image people in the West have of the Muslim Arab has become a tradition that dates back to the eleventh century. He writes that the conflict between Christians and Muslims stems from differences in religious beliefs between the two groups and that because the nature of those beliefs has not changed the fundamental nature of the conflict between the two cultures has not changed. Surely after a thousand years has passed we can turn our attention to exploring ways in which our cultures coincide rather than continue to concentrate on ways in which they differ.

I am delighted that one of the most prestigious universities in the Middle East is organizing this conference. It is only appropriate, perhaps necessary, that the academy set the example in this regard and act as a unifying force throughout the world. First, because intellectual endeavor in every discipline has as its goal the generation of new ideas and the articulation of new truths that are, in as much as such a thing is possible, separate from ideologies. Scholastic endeavor is the concern of the community of academics worldwide, male or female, young or old, of every ideological persuasion Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu.

It is appropriate that the academy set the example in establishing the cultural middle ground among peoples because it is the group responsible for passing on to young scholars the best of what has been thought and written and said through the ages in every culture of the world. The academy is the group that, more than any other, forms the thought processes for generations to come. It has also been the group that, in part, has perpetuated notions separating the East and the West for so many generations. Now the academy must set the example in working to unify what has been divided for so long. When as scholars we look for common ground we reap the tremendous benefits to be gained in interdisciplinary research. The very nature of interdisciplinary research represents the coming together of diverse groups of people from diverse disciplines who, together, can achieve what either one cannot do alone.

Importantly, it is the personal responsibility of each one of us to look at the person across the room or across a continent and see a fellow traveler rather than a stranger. Each one of us is responsible for searching out the cultural middle ground in our own lives and for looking at others to see not how we are different but how we are alike. This effort, which sounds manageable enough in theory, is difficult in practice. It requires us not simply to examine the ways of others but to look honestly inside ourselves and determine whether or not we have within us the generosity of spirit toward other cultures that we ask them to have toward ours. It requires us to recognize that we are all a part of the universal human experience, and that our humanity is the most fundamental aspect of the cultural middle ground.

Searching for unifying factors among cultures that have been at odds for such a long time requires us now, both personally and collectively, to work at replacing resentment with understanding, suspicion with generosity, and indifference with resolve. I would like to end with a very brief story from the Cherokee Nation, which is a Native American group in the



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United States:

A Cherokee elder, teaching his grandchildren about life, told them this tale. He said to them: "A terrible fight is going on inside me. It is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, and false pride. The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, friendship, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight," the elder told his grandchildren, "is going on inside you and inside every one of us." The children thought for a minute and then one of them asked his grandfather: "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee replied: "The one you feed."



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