



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

### **BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS**

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### **Reference**

Nanji, Azim. *A Convocation of Birds*, Baccalaureate Address, Stanford University Commencement Weekend, June 17, 1995

### **Abstract**

Professor Nanji's address here focuses on the theme of Unity in Diversity. In a changing global environment, which seems to be threatened by all kinds of fragmentation and lack of hope, a university provides a meeting point for individuals from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to engage in a dialogue and to build a broader vision that embodies all these traditions.

### **Key Words**

global, vision, harmony

## **A CONVOCATION OF BIRDS**

You were not here very long, perhaps no longer than four to five years. However, in that time, you and Stanford University have created and shared both individual and common space. It is that space and the space beyond, where so many dramatic changes took place in that short span, that I wish to discuss today.

### **Dramatic Movements in world history**

My choice of title "A Convocation of Birds," is actually based on a Muslim literary text which I have come to find many of you have read as part of your "Culture, Ideas and Values" core requirement. I chose it to help us weave together a narrative that might help to define and assess some of the significance and meaning of your experience here and the sense of fragmentation and pessimism that exists in the world outside, that space beyond. For indeed the past four or five years have witnessed dramatic moments in recent world history. You and I saw the unravelling of the Soviet Union and the ideology that underpinned it; we witnessed human folly and savagery in Bosnia; unspeakable atrocities in Rwanda and Burundi; the peace process in the Middle East and Northern Ireland, the extraordinary political and racial breakthroughs in South Africa. We were also reminded that the struggles represented in the conclave of Tiananmen Square are still with us in China, and that for all its apparent stability, radicalism can manifest itself as easily in Japan as elsewhere. It is clear that no area of the world is exempt from the kind of economic and political problems that continue to besiege all of us across the global landscape.

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## **Changing Values at Home**

Added to this is our own domestic and regional circumstances which include the mirror the Oklahoma bombing held up reflecting a devaluation of what had always appeared to be the mythic, and therefore indestructible, core of American values; chilling statistics about urban plight and shift in political rhetoric and choices, that seem to be unfolding too quickly for us to even attempt to judge their long-term consequences for the future of America. Both our immediate neighbours, Canada and Mexico are wrestling with issues that indicate a disintegration of the centre, a Balkanisation of political identities and economic standards.

## **Unity in Diversity**

About a hundred years ago, this University was founded to create a new academic space on a frontier, to mirror and also perhaps to rival the great universities of the East: Harvard, Yale, Brown and Princeton. But there was a striking newness in the choice of what this University would look like. The Chapel behind you and the architectural style of some of the buildings on this campus are one example of that choice, the blending of Romanesque and Mediterranean, sometimes simplistically referred to as "Moorish" or "Mission" architecture. But in reality it was a blend of many traits, Muslim Spanish influences in particular linked to the inspiration of the local environment and materials: we may read in the architecture of this space, what that newness represented on the frontier - an attempt at creating harmony in the midst of displacement, a rebuilding and an openness to the multiple influences present on the frontier. The visual representation of space in architecture provides us with a vocabulary and a landscape in which we can read how diversity is expressed as unity. This heterogeneous combination provides an example for our own condition - the University as the place where all these conversations come together, not that we may build individual shrines that function to separate but rather to provide a commonly accessible space in which to address collective goals and individual dreams. It is in that sense that Stanford is a University, a space where commonality can be addressed and explored. Hence the choice of the title "A Convocation of Birds" because I want to explore with you and create through that narrative a vision of the intersection of these two kinds of space which go beyond our own individual concerns and bring us together, assembling us so to speak to define what we share in a common space.

The poem begins with a gathering of birds in a convocation to address two important questions: (1) Where is the symbolic reference point of their oneness and their common ancestry? and (2) What commitments do they need to make to discover these goals? They choose a mediating figure who can guide them on their journey and quest. My sense is that a University represents such a mediating space and reference point - a place of gathering where we ask questions and seek answers, debate our diversity in a common public space and learn to explore and preserve the answers that our quest might yield. Such a mediating presence is a prelude to the pursuit of knowledge.

When this University began, I do not think the founders envisioned the type of conversation that would be going on here today. In projecting the uses and expressions of intellectual life, spirituality, and religiosity in this space, they could not have imagined what a diverse and multi-faith religious community America and indeed our inter-connected world, would become. That is the most important symbolic sense of Convocation. We gather, not simply as members of diverse traditions and different backgrounds but we are in conversation with each other, as participants in a joint endeavour who represent and have the possibility of affecting others outside of this space. That is the "newness" which begins here today as you journey



away from this space. Our national conversation, influenced by factors beyond our local, national and religious boundaries, has become much larger since this university was built, and it is taking place at a time when there is a pervading sense of crisis about who we are as international citizens and as members of national institutions. As we look around the world, global and national changes seem only to have exacerbated fragmentation. There is a sense of a splintering of self and of society.

## **A Meeting Ground**

As I think of this University, it seems that from its beginnings as a new intellectual space - it has come to embrace much more. I do not want to use the hackneyed term "global" again, but it is something that helps us transcend the focus on mere local or national interests. We bring all that together here as representatives of many traditions to create, I think, vision that is broader, a vision that embodies all of the memories and traditions that are present in our respective histories and institutions and allows us to create a larger model of unity that might reconcile what appears to be opposite or in conflict.

Having made that point, let me say that moments of transition, besides being very traumatic, are also times of opportunity because we are driven by a sense of crisis, we are driven by a sense of urgency to rethink our priorities, to rethink who we are and to bring that to our understanding as a way of resolving a greater problem, and of establishing momentum for each of the constituencies that we represent. The striking thing, it seems to me, in talking about goals of unity is that we do not lack the vocabulary or experience of it. Each of our cultural and religious tradition - and we have traditions represented here that go back five, six thousand years - these traditions contain from their beginning a vision and a concept that addresses the need to be together, to recognise one another's sense of obligation and belonging to a human community.

We need to see if the elements mirrored in our histories and our vocabularies can be reactivated for new purposes. How we live together in the face of forces that divide and isolate us, is not just about what we do in our local communities or express in our individual lives but what we collectivise, what we create institutionally and what we leave as something that will have an impact on generations to come. We cannot any longer afford to particularise or limit in any one cultural or theological language the answers we seek.

In thinking about this, I have found inspiration in a chapter of the Quran which is entitled Al-Balad: in Arabic it can signify a country, it can mean space, it can mean locality, and, by extension, it can even mean the earth. In that chapter, the Quran addresses the Prophet Muhammad and reminds him that as the embodiment of human values, he stands as both heir and custodian to the traditions that have preceded him here on earth. When one looks at the world as it is, we are forced to recognise that our inherited boundaries and pursuits invariably present us with choices that tempt us to put self-interest ahead of other commitments. The options and choices of what we must do for those outside our immediate circle are not very often a priority. The Quran, in addressing the Prophet, does not offer any simple answer, or solution, but it asks that we pay attention to both centre and margins and to strive to reconcile the differences. It is the quality of mind and spirit of human compassion and caring, the building of community through personal and collective commitment, that according to the Quran separates those who make a difference from those who shuffle through life unconcerned.



Today in addition to the communities that came from Europe, we have faith traditions in America which have their roots in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific and in other spaces of the world in between. Each possesses a frame of values grounded in community life. From Universities we derive the knowledge and the technologies of translation which draw upon fiscal, institutional, organisation skills that translate knowledge to affect lives, not just of communities, but the total environment with which communities are engaged. The potential for combining resources to refresh our common understanding and acting on it, is immense.

The modern University is an integral part of the enabling environment of institutions that helps us build a civil society. It is the guarantor of the public square that allows us to forge consensus. A little over two hundred years ago, a debate over how to create a civil society began in America. It led to many institutions, Stanford University is one of them. But that debate is no longer restricted to this space. It has spilled over into the rest of the world. The distinctions and the resources that I have mentioned are blurred. Faith traditions do not only articulate values, they also bring great organisational skills and leadership. Universities do not only bring technologies of translation, they also bring a way of translating those values through educational and cultural engagement. Universities also represent a means of merging not contesting. Indeed, our best hope of combining pluralism and diversity in a way that our otherness remains one among others, and is not particularised to the point of chauvinism lies in demonstrating the intellectual poverty of dichotomising knowledge and basing our understanding of life on false dualities. We live in a culture where non-market values seem to have less and less operating significance. It would be a travesty of all the things we have talked about today, if the market economy and its culture became our sole criteria for thinking and acting as human communities.

In the tradition of Islamic spirituality, in which the issues of society are mirrored, the "Convocation of Birds" asks us to look beyond at values that raise questions for us all: "Who are we?" "What does it mean to be a bird?" "What is 'birdness'?" It also asks us to be aware of love and passion, about differences and concern for each other. Finally it also poses the question of whether there is an articulation of our 'birdness' that transcends us all?" The journey of the birds is a long one, over seven valleys and seven mountains. Each valley, each mountain is a step towards dissolving otherness, dissolving boundaries, of creating a common vocabulary, and forging a common language. At the end, Thirty Birds survive, perhaps like you who have survived these past four years! They then come together in a space beyond the last valley looking for that articulation, that "sound byte" that will tell them what it is they have come to accomplish and discover. They wait. They do not hear a "sound byte," no great vision flashes before their eyes. In silence, they turn inwards, examine their experience, and focus on each other. In Persian, the word for thirty birds is si-murgh. The space and entity that they have come to discover is also called Simurgh, their mythical originator. In experiencing their joint quest and condition, they have discovered their commonality and destiny.

Understanding of this kind is born out of the experience of self and knowledge of the Other. It is born in a series of quiet moments and silence during the quest. A chapel, a mosque, a memorial, a convocation provide those significant spaces, where between the silences that exist, we may as the Thirty Birds find and embrace a common commitment. That experience might enable us to carry both the spiritual capacity and personal knowledge we have acquired and to share it in the space beyond the horizon - the Twenty First Century.

Thank you.