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Truth and trust making in troubled times

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**African Muslims' Global Connections:
Truth and Trust Making in Troubled Times**

Inaugural Address

Delivered on the appointment to
the Endowed Chair of The Anthropology of Islam in Africa and its Diaspora
at the University of Amsterdam
on 5 October 2022

by
Mayke Kaag

African Muslims' Global Connections: Truth and Trust Making in Troubled Times

Geachte heer de Rector Magnificus,
Geachte mevrouw de Decaan,
Leden van het Curatorium van de leerstoel De Antropologie van Islam in Afrika en haar Diaspora,
Bestuursleden van het Afrika Studie-Centrum,

Dear colleagues, friends and family,

This afternoon, I would like to take you on a journey around the world in order to explore how African Muslims deal with questions of truth and trust in various settings of global encounter.

The evident first question is : why concentrate on global encounters?

Well, I would like to argue that in these times of intensive globalisation, it has become particularly important to consider the dynamics of Islam in its global connections.

African Islam has long been considered as marginal to the history and contemporary dynamics of the Muslim World, and up till now, general studies on Islam may still simply ignore the African continent. However, Muslims in Africa have always been connected to the rest of the Muslim world, by trade, networks of learners and scholars, migration and so on. Already in the Middle Ages of our European calendar, for instance, West African Islamic students went studying in Saudi Arabia, where they met with students from present day Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia (O'Fahey 2004; Hunwick 1984). And the trans-Saharan trade routes connected West-Africa to a much larger world system of exchange centred on the Muslim world, extending from West Africa across Arabia and Iran all the way to Inner Mongolia (Ross 2011).

Over time and in the current era, African Muslims' global connections have both intensified and diversified, among other things by increased travel possibilities (at least technically), by heightened diplomatic and economic interest in Africa, and the emergence of mass and social media. It is important to study these diverse global connections and understand how African Muslims interpret, use, and help determine them, including how this influences processes of religious meaning-making, forms of political Islam, and further connections that Muslims in Africa and the diaspora establish. And, I would like to argue, a fruitful way to explore these and related questions is by a focus on truth and trust.

So the obvious second question is: why focus on truth and trust?

I think we can all agree that we are living in rather disturbing times. Covid-19, migration challenges, the climate crisis, and the war in Ukraine, among other things, have forcefully confronted us with our global interdependence. The current polycrisis, on the one hand, goes together with major uncertainty, distrust and inequality, but, on the other hand, also with an intensified search for connection, morality and meaning. I would like to contend that in this, truth and trust have taken on a renewed importance. People are looking for truth to hold on to, but how to do this in an era in which received wisdoms no longer do, traditional holders of authority over knowledge have become contested, and intense clashes take place between different truths that are built on alternative facts? People are looking for a community to be part of. But how to achieve this, in an era in which one is increasingly confronted with unknown others and fast changes in our physical world as well as in

cyberspace? Truth and trust seem ever more important but at the same time less readily available and more difficult to establish.

In this lecture, I would like to explore how African Muslims deal with this challenge of achieving trusted communities and shared narratives, and how their religion plays a role in this. My aim being twofold: first, to contribute to an understanding of Islam in Africa and its diaspora – because, obviously, that is what this Chair is about - and second, to help a reflection on the dynamics of our troubled times.

Interestingly, in religion, and thus also in Islam, truth and trust converge in forceful ways: religion is about truth and trust, one embraces a truth and trusts that it is The Truth. But this is not something that is proven on the spot – only the future, the last day, the Hereafter, will allow to see whether this has indeed been the case. So Truth and Trust define one's relationship to God, they enable to come close to one's religiosity, which can be more on the side of Truth (dogma), or more on the side of Trust (one does not know but lays one's fate in the hands of God – nicely illustrated by sayings like 'Insha'Allah' ('if God wishes') and 'bismillah' ('in the name of God')). The coupled terms of truth and trust however also define the faith community: a community of trust built on embracing the same truth. In this way, they help to grasp what religion is, both spiritually and socially.

With these initial reflections in mind, let us begin our journey. For my role as a guide, I will mainly use findings of my former and ongoing research on West-African Muslims in the diaspora, and on global providers of Islamic education in West and Central Africa - but finally I will also delve into a field that I would like to explore further in the coming years, that of Islamic environmentalism.

I will show that Islam provides truth that helps people to cope with hardship, and that offers guidance and inspiration for dealing with contemporary collective problems. I will also show that Islam provides a basis for trust (and thus connection), first of all through a shared Truth; and secondly, by the moral obligation to trust one's brothers and sisters in faith. But while a shared religion provides trust at a certain basic level by a shared vision of truth, this truth is also contested. (Categories of) African Muslims are engaged in diverse conversations over truth with various others: within their own community, with other Muslims, with non-Muslim others.

Truth and Trust Making in the African Muslim Diaspora

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Such as here, just around the corner, in Amsterdam-West.

This building, previously a school, has been transformed into a community centre a couple of years ago. Apart from the counseling and other community services to be found here, it is also home to a diversity of diaspora and ethnic associations. When one enters on an evening or in the weekend, in one room, for example, one may find a Turkish organisation, in another one a group of Somali women, while in another part of the building, Surinamese are playing Caribbean music.

A couple of years ago, a Senegalese religious association was also part of the organisations having their home in the building. The Senegalese belong to the Muriddiyya, one of the main Islamic Sufi orders in Senegal, and used the time slots reserved to them mainly for socialising, praying and singing *khassids*, religious texts written by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the Senegalese founder of the

order. Murids in the diaspora relate that practicing their religion helps them to deal with the hardships encountered such as racism and discrimination. Their faith also helps them to be patient and optimistic: even if one's situation is bad now, with the help of God and 'Serigne Touba'— a preferred term to refer to Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba—one's situation may one day improve (see also Kaag 2008).

The members of the association relate that in the beginning, it was quite difficult to find their place amidst the other groups. While the Surinamese and the Senegalese recognised each other as 'black brothers', the Senegalese felt that the Surinamese tended to look down upon them and were trying to tell them how they should 'integrate' in the Netherlands. This expressed itself, among other things, in criticism on the Senegalese's time keeping and handling the keys. The Senegalese, in their turn, sometimes got annoyed by the Surinamese having a party with alcohol and loud music, while they were having their religious meeting in an adjacent room. With the Moroccans, they experienced other frictions. The Senegalese said that both groups acknowledged their religious ties and heritage, but that they still felt that the Moroccans were trying to tell them how to behave as 'good' Muslims – reflecting prejudices against Black African Muslims.

There specifically appeared to be doubts among the Muslim groups whether Muridism can be considered 'real' Islam, which is related to the Baaye Fall movement, a subgroup of the Muriddiyya for whom hard work replaces prayer and fast. The Murids said that the other Muslims did not really grasp the essence of this, and they tried to rectify things by inviting others to their gatherings in order to show them how precious the teachings of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba are. More in general, they were generous in sharing food and the like.

The conscious efforts of not having confrontational discussions about religion but engaging in more subtle conversations and trying to create trust appeared to be fruitful: a Senegalese informant relates that over time, relationships with the others improved and they started to mutually accept one another, and everything went well - until a weekend in 2018.

The Gambian community in the Netherlands mourned a loss among their members, and were looking for a place to have a commemoration ceremony. As the Senegalese had their home in the community house, they offered the Gambians their place in the time slot that had been reserved for them. It appeared however that at the same time, in the room next door, the Surinamese were having a dancing party. The Gambians got very angry by this disturbance of their mourning ceremony and it appears in the end, fighting broke out between the groups. This meant the end for the Senegalese as permanent users of the community house....While they had out of solidarity let their place to their Gambian brothers, this was not according to the house rules. It appeared that the fragile trust that they had been able to build was broken by this event. With their trust being betrayed, the others fell back on received truths on the Senegalese of which they saw proof in the event.

The foregoing first of all shows that trust has a strong temporal dimension. It takes time for building trust and countering distrust, while time also allows for built-up trust being betrayed: The truth is not what one had trusted it to be...

We also see that there are layers of connection and of friction between people: connection based on shared truth and basic trust, and frictions due to contestations over truth as well as the interference of distrust in other areas (such as racial and cultural distrust).

Truth and Trust Making in Global Encounters regarding Islamic Education in Africa

The latter is also very clearly the case in the field of Islamic education, another instance of global encounter between African Muslims and others, in which the political is more prominently present,

and confrontations over truth tend to be more central in the interaction. To explore this a bit further, I would like to take you to Chad and Niger in Central and West Africa.

Islamic education in Africa has always been nurtured from supra-local connections, such as the networks of teachers and students that I referred to in my introduction, but for a long time it importantly remained embedded in localised personal relationships. Over the last decades however, the sector has increasingly opened up and received funds and input from elsewhere in the world. Especially from the 1970s onwards, the oil boom in the Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran, has helped international aid from these countries, including in the field of education (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003; Ghandour 2002).

Islamic charities have aimed to deliver aid inspired by Islamic principles of solidarity and redistribution of wealth, and the need of bringing people to God, but they have also been instruments in the larger geo-political agendas of the sending states – which, it should be noted, also holds true for much aid coming from the West, however that is not the topic of my talk today. Through their activities, these Islamic organisations also take on political clout in the local African settings in which they come to work, especially in contexts in which Islam already has political significance, for instance in the competition between different strands of Islam, or between Muslim and Christian categories of the population.

N'Djamena, Chad

In Chad, for instance. Here we have arrived in the capital N'Djamena, and enter an orphanage and school that was established by a Saudi NGO. History and geography are no longer taught from an Eurocentric (French) perspective – as is still the case in most of francophone West-Africa as a heritage of the colonial past - but having the Arab world as the centre, and with Arabic as the main language. Religious, including moral, education is important, too.

The orphanage and the school are funded by gifts from the Gulf countries. Inspired by the Islamic principle that the wealth that is entrusted to someone is a responsibility that he or she will be accounted for – and hopefully rewarded for – in the Hereafter, pious Muslims in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, donate to these kind of organisations. Money spent in this way will be beneficial (in material terms) to the target group, but equally (in terms of blessing) to the donor (. Care for orphans is deemed important, as it brings a lot of blessing, as does *da'wa* – literally Call to God, which may mean education in the case of Muslims, or conversion in the case of non-Muslims. The general perception in the Gulf is that Muslims in Africa are in need of being educated, as their religious practices would be contaminated by local customs. Furthermore, many people in the Gulf see Africa as a region where Islam still has great opportunities to expand - therefore proselytising is considered important, too (Kaag 2014; Kaag and Sahla 2020) .

As the organisations depend on these funds, they invest a lot in their trustworthiness towards their donors. They do so by extensive media coverage of their activities, such as here at the distribution of clothes in the orphanage, and images of these find their way back to the head offices and donors in the Gulf:

Creating trust towards the African target population is obviously also important. At first sight, in Muslim contexts in West-Africa, this does not seem that difficult, as their shared religion provides the basis for trust between these NGOs and their Muslim target population. This is also what is mentioned by both NGO staff and African informants. In practice, however, I also found a lot of distrust. What is more, also a lot of frustration, exactly because the fact of having the same religion had raised expectations about behaviour and cultural proximity that in reality did not occur. Racism with its associated stereotypes created friction, too.

Like in the Amsterdam case, in such encounters with unfamiliar others, it is important to actively engage in trust building, which includes signalling that one is trustworthy. Showing trustworthiness both to the donors and to the African target groups is however sometimes challenging, and needs to be solved in creative ways. For instance, putting a local as a country director fosters local trust and acceptance, however meets with distrust from the head office and the donors in the Gulf. In this context, North-Africans such as Moroccans and Tunisians, have appeared as suitable country directors, because being the ideal middlemen; they are considered as both Arabs - and on that basis trusted by both the charities and their donors -, and Africans - so considered capable of establishing trustful relationships with the local African population (Kaag and Sahla 2020).

These Islamic charities from the Gulf however not only have to deal with their donors and their African target groups, but function in a wider politically loaded context. Islamic charities from the Gulf countries generally promote a Salafi form of Islam, a reformist current that aims to go back to the first generation of Muslims and that is very much scripturally oriented, which makes it, we would say, a rather 'strict' form of Islam, while most Chadians are Sufis, a current in which Muslims are more oriented towards finding divine truth and knowledge in the direct personal experience of God. Sufi religious leaders may collaborate with these organisations, but are also distrustful about the latter's ambitions. The Chadian Sufi leadership is engaged in quite a harsh competition with a Salafi minority, in which these organisations are considered a support to the 'enemy'. In these and other local power struggles, post 9/11 globalised discourses about Islamic terrorism have been put to use to create distrust against these charities and, using accusations of supporting terrorism, have them leave the country (Kaag 2014).

In addition to having to navigate relationships with African Islamic groups, Islamic charities also compete with Christian organisations, especially in the South of Chad, which has been mostly Christian but where Islam is on the rise and where Christian and Islamic organisations compete over Truth and following. At the same time they have to try to remain trustworthy to the Chadian state and in the larger field of international aid. The tensions that this creates can be illustrated by the fact that they need to show to their donors in the Gulf countries that they have brought many Africans to God through *da'wa*, while in general this has to remain hidden to Western audiences, with whom this does not sit well. This means that trust making towards one audience may contribute to distrust from another audience, which necessitates multiplex trust-making strategies and navigating complex webs of expectations. This all is complexified by modern mass and social media: these are valuable means for showing trustworthiness (and are readily used as such by many Islamic organisations), yet it proves difficult to control who the audience is (Kaag and Sahla 2020).

Niamey, Niger

The layering of a shared Truth and basic trust between Muslims with, on top of this, friction over contents of education and distrust because of geo-political and cultural aspects, also came very clearly to the fore when I visited the new girls' campus of the International Islamic University in Niamey last year with a number of African colleagues, all Muslim. The campus, financed by Saudi Arabia, rises majestically up amidst of a rather modest neighbourhood out of the centre of Niamey. It had just been built and not yet taken into use at that time, but the registration had opened already. My colleagues on the one hand were happy about this opportunity of education for girls and admired the newly built complex consisting of seven faculties, including not only Islamic studies, but also social sciences, nursing, economic sciences etcetera, as well as a number of dormitories. On the other hand, there was annoyance, too, about the clear sign of what was felt as Saudi showing off their superiority, and there was mistrust about what would be taught there. Would the government be able and willing to monitor this? Some colleagues said that a Salafi approach is not what they need in Niger, as they fear it would

contribute to polarisation within the Muslim community. In our conversation with the – Nigerois - director of the University, emotions were running high, particularly when we learnt that only Muslim girls would be admitted. To the majority, this seemed logical for the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, but why for the other faculties, too? One of them said that he himself had his kids in a Catholic school, so why would Christian girls not be admitted here? There was further fear that the geopolitical strategy of the Saudi state would well suit the Niger government that could show off with such a prestigious project - but was sufficient attention being paid to the possible repercussions for larger questions of well-being and peace in society?

African Truth and Trust Making in the Global Islamic Environmentalist Movement

The foregoing has shown some of the challenges involved in building trusted communities and shared truths in global encounters in which African Muslims engage with others. Islam provides moral support and guidance as well as incentives for collective action, but it appears that active trust making to various audiences is required, while power dynamics, personal and collective experiences, as well as globalised discourses about the other appear to nourish distrust instead of trust.

In the coming years, I would like to study these issues further in also looking at the participation of Africans in the transnational Islamic environmentalist movement, as an example of building global Muslim connections around new agendas. Eco-Islam or Islamic environmentalism has its roots in the 1970s and was mainly led by Islamic scholars and activists from the UK, USA, and Indonesia. They started to think about Islamic principles that would help to combat environmental degradation and climate change. The Islamic notion that human beings are the stewards of the Earth that has been entrusted to them by God is a guiding inspirational principle. In the years 2000, often in preparation of high level diplomatic meetings around the environment, Muslim leaders convened for issuing their official statements and proposing their plans for action (Schwencke 2012).

Bogor, Indonesia

Such as here, in Bogor in Indonesia, where in 2010 the first international Conference on Muslim Action on Climate Change was held. In these earlier meetings, African participants were mostly only from Morocco, Egypt, Libya and South Africa. One of the few Black African Islamic leaders who played a role at this stage was Cheikh Hassan Cisse from Senegal (Schwencke 2012). His following is not that big in his own country but all the more in other parts of West Africa and especially also in the United States – and it this latter link through which he got involved. This illustrates how pre-established global connections help determine who gets included in certain conversations (and how).

Cyberspace

Apart from these high level initiatives which proliferated over the years, the more interesting conversations - and non-conversations - are nowadays to be found online. Websites and blogs like *greenprophet* (greenprophet.com) and *balancedbayt* (balancedbayt.com) are flourishing. Lifestyles that are eco-friendly and Islamic are particularly central topics, such as greening your hadj and how to spend your Ramadan in an eco-friendly manner. *Faithfully Sustainable* (faithfullysustainable.org), one of my favourites, was set up in the USA by two Muslim girls from African and Indian descent and especially targets young black and brown Muslims. One would expect that such platforms facilitate

global connections between Muslims who are interested in eco-Islamic initiatives, including between African Muslims and Muslims in other parts of the world. It appears however that often, the logics of these platforms tend to reproduce rather neocolonial perspectives: on the website of IFEES (ifees.org.uk), for instance, a prominent eco-Islamic NGO based in the UK, Africa merely features in the form of projects for which one can donate funds: just click and do good! Among the projects featured are initiatives to 'teach' local Muslim communities in Zanzibar and Tanzania on Islam and the environment.

Beyond this rather neocolonial integration in eco-Islam initiatives, in which the leading truth still appears to be that Africa is in need of help and being educated, African environmentalist action based on Islamic values is happening on the continent, often also supported and sometimes initiated by African diasporic groups, such as *'Touba ville Verte'*, which aims to green the holy city of Touba in Senegal, and is very much financially supported by Murids in the diaspora – who, exposed to specific forms of environmental initiatives in the West, may feel attracted to this kind of action, thus creating transnational interaction and synergy. In my preliminary research, however, I also found that African Muslims still find it important to be included in more global conversations on the role of Islam in environmental conservation and eco-Islamic action and this on an equal footing, especially because Africans may have other problems and priorities in dealing with climate change and the like, and possibly also other solutions.

In this context, it should be clear that perceptions of climate change vary among African Muslims like among other groups, ranging from seeing human causes to believing in spiritual reasons, or denying that climate change is a problem, at all - which makes that also in this field it will be important to study conversations over truth among African Muslims and between African Muslims and others, including the influence of religious traditions and experiences of environmental problems, the ways in which both Islamic environmentalism and climate change denial may fit in political agendas, and how social and other media are put to use in this. On twitter for instance there is this interesting trend in which far-right representatives picture Islamists and environmentalists as devilish partners in crime – while trying to silence Muslim voices through referring to terrorism remains persistent in general.

Reflections and Research Questions

What has this trip around the world taught us? As said, clashes between different truths have become intense in an increasingly interconnected world, in which received truths and traditional holders of authority have progressively become contested, and a diversity of moralities and associated interests circulate widely, helped by the global spread of mass and social media. Also in Africa, new religious dogma's and ideas have developed in interplay with influences from Islam elsewhere in the world, for instance by African religious students who studied in Saudi Arabia, proselytising efforts by Islamic charities, and ideas that develop among diasporic communities, or that circulate through global online platforms. With more diversity than in the past, various truths have come to exist alongside and in competition with one another. Also claims to religious authority have diversified. This means that building trust has become indispensable for having followers and being listened to, but also that at community level, insecurity may foster feelings of distrust and retreat.

I think what our journey shows is that, in this context, Islam is important for community building, contributing to cohesion within Muslim groups and to connection between different groups of Muslims, while it has also helped to reach out to others. Islam has however also a political role in various global encounters between categories of African Muslims and beyond, which often center on

harsh contestations over truth but also include cases in which Islam is instrumentalised for political goals. Finally, I have aimed to also highlight the inspirational role of Islam.

Some people, looking at the title of my lecture, might have expected that my talk would be about religious violence and Islamic extremism in Africa. I could have taken this up as a topic - as processes of truth and trust making obviously also play a role in this - but not in the sense that Islam in Africa is creating 'us' a hard time. Most Muslims in Africa and beyond, like other people in the world, see Islamic extremism as part of our collective troubled times. We are together in this – as we are in the other global challenges, like building inclusive societies and countering and adapting to environmental change. I have wanted to focus on these latter issues, as Islam in Africa is not an exotic and far-away topic nor a peril, but in many ways relevant to us globally.

This brings me to the second ambition of my lecture, that of contributing to a reflection on the dynamics of these troubled times. I have shown how shared narratives and trusted communities are important to people and help them to understand, to cope with, and to find refuge from current problems. It appears however also that, in the end, communities are often built on truths constructed around us/them distinctions. Obviously, exclusionary narratives have always been a characteristic of community formation, but it seems that they currently have become particularly intense and outspoken. Feelings of insecurity seem to make discourses that promise that one is 'in', one of us, while others are 'out', specifically attractive to people. And thus, a register to play on by leaders and would-be leaders who, as we have seen, nowadays have to actively engage in truth and trust making in search for a following - which trend is finally reinforced by the logics and functioning of online platforms (see also Büscher 2020).

In this sense, the study of trust and truth making appears promising for a better understanding of our current era.

Among the larger questions are the following:

- How do processes and strategies of truth and trust making change (or not change) under current intensified globalisation, characterised by chains of interactions increasingly stretched over time and space, amplified contacts with not so familiar others, the necessity to act in unfamiliar settings, and the datafication of interaction?
- What are the repercussions of this for the creation of inclusive trusted communities and shared truth?
- What differences in the workings of truth and trust can be distinguished between various social categories, such as generation, gender, culture, and between different social contexts?
- Finally, both trust and truth are loaded with emotion and value – your trust being betrayed does not only mean that something is not true, it really hurts. Acknowledging this, how does the study of trust and truth help us to understand current human struggles beyond an utilitarian and superficial perspective, and to reach the emotional, the gut-feeling, and close-the-heart?

These are the questions I would like to explore further during my appointment, together with my colleagues at the UvA, the African Studies Centre, colleagues in Africa and elsewhere in the world. I will do so on the basis of my own research, but I believe that these questions are also relevant for the programme group 'Exploring Diversity: Processes of belonging and exclusion' of which I am a member at the UvA, and for the research programme of the African Studies Centre.

Finally..

The foregoing exposé on truth and trust making evidently also raises questions about truth and trust making in *research* on African Muslims' global connections, and in our own work in academia more in general. How do we as researchers navigate trust and mistrust, how do we signal our trustworthiness towards our informants? Also: Should I be trusted because of this toga and this beret? And because I speak from this pulpit? How do claims to truth and showing trustworthiness work in our own academic universe? How do we (try to) create inclusive trusted academic communities and shared truth? In the end it is also about the politics of knowledge production, and I would like to take this opportunity for an invitation to also together look further into this.

With this reflection in mind, I am very grateful that I have been entrusted this Chair on the Anthropology of Islam in Africa and its Diaspora. It means a lot to me, and I will do my utmost not to betray your trust and to contribute to the mission of the academy, that is to produce knowledge that is ethical, reliable and transparent. I adhere to the principle of kaleidoscopic knowledge production, as I have developed elsewhere with one of my former students Miriam Ocadiz (Kaag and Ocadiz 2019). It considers that, instead of de/legitimising certain positionalities for being un/able to speak about certain phenomena, the best way forward is to bring different partial perspectives and knowledge together in order to dialogue and complement one another for a more complete comprehension, like a kaleidoscope in which different shapes and colours produce a fascinating picture. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope further highlights how the everlasting diversity and plurality of perspectives enriches, instead of limits, academia. Finally, it illustrates how continuous dialogue among different perspectives does not necessarily lead to fixed agreements and answers set in stone, but that instead, friction may be seen as an opportunity to move forward - with the promise to find new and refreshing perspectives. For such a kaleidoscopic perspective to evolve, however, specific attitudes and skills are required:

- A modest and humble attitude, acknowledging that everyone can only contribute a partial perspective, partial knowledge, and that no one has the monopoly;
- A critical attitude towards one's own positionality;
- Openness to others, meaning a genuine interest in, and the eagerness to learn from, other people, while also being prepared to share one's own convictions, doubts, questions and experiences for debate;
- Team spirit and a willingness to share academic spaces and endorse the capacities and potential of fellow scholars;
- And finally, a conceptualisation of knowledge that recognises that it is not something that can be owned by one group or category but that it is something to be built together.

I hope to be able to contribute to that in the coming years, including rectifying and ameliorating my own attitudes in these respects, together with colleagues and other collaborators, and I am very grateful for having been given this opportunity.

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