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Dialogue for understanding continues

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SHOWN on television some years ago was a public lecture on Islam for non-Muslims. It was held in a church in an American city. It was conducted by a lecturer who was accompanied by several fellow Muslims. Equally surprising was that after the talk they performed, in the church itself, the Muslim prayers facing the Kaaba in Mecca.

Other dialogues at various levels have been organised to foster understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. In Britain recently the Prince of Wales spoke on the topic of "Building Bridges between Islam and the West". Speaking to Middle East experts he said the West would benefit from closer study of Islamic traditions and that British schools should consider employing more Muslim teachers.

Earlier, in April 1996, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad delivered a keynote address at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies on the subject "Islam - The Misunderstood Religion". In his concluding remarks calling for international understanding of Islam he said:

"What Muslims must do is to go back to the Holy Quran and the genuine Hadiths, study and interpret them in the context of the present world. It is Allah's will that the world has changed. It is not for man to reverse what has been willed by Allah. The faithful must look for guidance from the teachings of the Quran and the Hadith in the present context. Islam is not meant only for the 7th Century Arabs. Islam is for all times and for every part of the world. If we Muslims understand this, then there will be less misunderstandings among us. If the non-Muslims appreciate the problems that the Muslims have in trying to adjust to modern changes, then they will not misunderstand Islam and the Muslims as much as they do now. And the world will be a better place if all these misunderstandings are removed."

Several months after Dr Mahathir's address, the Oxford Centre organised an international conference on the topic "The Islamic World and the Third Industrial Revolution: the political, economic and cultural implications of changes in information technology". It was attended by some 60 academic experts on Islam, advisors to several Muslim potentates, members of the diplomatic corps representing Muslim countries in Britain and senior Arab editors.

Of interest then is the summary on its proceedings. There was, for instance, the reminder that the Islamic world is not a homogeneous entity. Consisting of many different societies with unequal levels of economic and technical development they have "not managed to act together as an effective political or economic bloc".

Noted was the realisation among Muslims of their powerlessness when facing the West. Among examples of their impotence was the Iraqi defeat in the Gulf war, the inability to help fellow Muslims in Bosnia, Palestine, Kashmir and elsewhere.

Of importance, therefore, was the need to close the technological gap with the West and that they must not merely be consumers, among other things, of the new information technology. And that before the imbalance could be corrected Muslim societies must effect political and social changes.

As is evident, some Muslim governments are not democratic and transparent.

There were discussions on Internet, and it was described as "the death

of distance" and that faith and worship are in effect an effort to cross or close the distance between the individual and God.

A speaker had then referred to Prophet Muhammad's "Night Journey" (Israk-Mikraj) and suggested that the crossing and closing of distances had been a striking and formative element of Islam as a religion and civilisation. Quote: "The Islamic calendar dates from the migration of the believers from an intolerant Makka to a receptive Madina. Makka was not thereby abandoned: it was soon instituted as, and has ever since remained, the direction of prayer for all Muslims wherever they may be in the world, and the focus of their hopes of pilgrimage and nearness to God.

"From time immemorial the Arabs have criss-crossed deserts on their camels without losing their way or sense of where home is. The Prophet's "Night Journey" or Ascension symbolises the annihilation of distance at three levels: the journeying from Makka to Jerusalem and the return; from the earth to the heavens and the return; from the 'present' of the Prophet to the 'past' of Moses and Jesus, with whom, among other Emissaries of God, he conversed, and the return to his own time and the continuation of his mission."

As expected, the summary added, gender imbalance formed a most lively and spirited part of discussions. There was reference to the Malaysian experience where the advance of information technology has led to manifold increase in the employment of women in the field. The government was said to have become worried over the lack of balance and by so-called women-dominated workplaces.

Noted was that nothing in the Quran and the Hadiths prohibit women working but that in many countries Muslims have generally accepted that men are the breadwinners and the women's role is as wives and mothers.

How then will the Islamic world prepare for the 21st Century? This in fact will be the topic of an international symposium to be held in Kuala Lumpur next month following an agreement of co-operation between the Oxford Centre and the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia. It was concluded as a direct result of Dr Mahathir's lecture at Oxford.

Among participants will be non-Muslim academics. This is as it should be in view of the unending torrents of copy on Islam. There are films in the cinemas and on television too which denigrate the religion, and there are books by such as Gilles Kepel titled Allah in the West: Islamic Movements in America and Europe.

There is then the commentary by critics such as Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, director of the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity in Britain. He says with forthrightness that Prince Charles is wrong, and that Islam does menace the West.

Published recently in London was a report about Muslims in Britain planning 100 new mosques by the millennium. Quote: "Unlike most of the 1,000 existing mosques that are converted warehouses, churches or community halls, the new places of worship will be of traditional Islamic design with a central dome and minarets".

In a footnote was information that 450 new churches in the Church of England have been built in the past 25 years. In the Roman Catholic Church - 3,700 - there was an increase of four in 1914-95.

Also drawing media attention is Britain's first Muslim state school due to open in London next year. It is founded by Yusuf Islam, former pop star Cat Stevens. Mentioned too were warnings by detractors that it could become a hotbed of Islamic extremism.

Writing in another British newspaper, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Britain, Ghazi Alghosbi pleaded for a thoughtful dialogue between Muslim countries and the West. He contended that what has taken place thus far is not a free dialogue. All the interlocutors, he said, are "prisoners of

their political past".

Welcomed, therefore, is the international symposium jointly organised by Ikim and the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in Kuala Lumpur next month. Dr Mahathir will deliver the keynote address after which he will have an open dialogue with participants.

After last October's stimulating session in Oxford other perspectives of things Islam vis-a-vis the West, and others, will emerge. And so the dialogue continues.

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