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Obstacles must be got rid of first

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IN response to C.H. Gallop's letter, 'Writer should build bridges' (NST, April 22), I would like to point out a few facts. As someone who works on the difficulties of inter-cultural and inter-civilisational dialogue and communication, I have always found that one of the major obstacles to contact has been the demonisation of the image of other cultures and societies.

Despite Gallop's suggestion that I am single-handedly responsible for the demonisation of the West, the fact that it is the global media (that is controlled and based in the developed Western world) which still holds enormous influence in determining the agenda on issues ranging from human rights to the environment.

It is the same global media (based in the West, mind you) that is also responsible for lopsided reportage on Africa, Asia, the Far East and the Islamic world.

All that I have been doing is to point out the numerous cases and instances when the media of the West parades its propaganda in the guise of the truth.

If this amounts to "using the hospitality and traditional tolerance" of countries like England to attack its "tradition, institutions and beliefs", I would submit that Gallop has gotten the wrong end of the stick.

The people he ought to be condemning are those Western personalities who continue to abuse the openness and hospitality of non-Western countries (Malaysia included) in order to portray them in a negative light. This is, in fact, one of the conclusions that was arrived at during the international conference on the demonisation of the image of Islam held in Penang two years ago.

The findings of the conference were subsequently edited and compiled by myself into the book Terrorising the Truth.

The participants to the conference included academics, scholars and researchers from all over the world, including the West.

The contributors to the conference noted that there was, in fact, a sustained attempt to distort the image and meaning of Islam the world over, and the blame was laid at the feet of governments and media of the West as well as the non-Western world that have begun to toe the same Islamophobic line.

In order to build bridges, the obstacles to genuine and equal contact have to be demolished first. This is why there has to be a sustained attempt to monitor, respond and challenge the distorted images of Islam, the Islamic world as well as Africa, Asia and the Far East that continue to descend upon us from the ivory towers of the West as well as satellite dishes.

It is therefore ironic that Gallop chooses to end his letter by quoting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call to Muslims to project an image of tolerance, when we know that he has also been one of the most vocal critics of the conduct of the Western-controlled media, whose attitudes have hardly changed from the bad old days of Empire.

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