

25/04/1997

Preparing Muslims for next millennium

Mazlan Nordin

AN international symposium on "The Islamic World and Global Cooperation: Preparing For The 21st Century" begins today with a keynote address by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It is jointly organised by the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding.

Posed is the question: how ready is the Muslim ummah to enter the next millennium? In such a journey with its many challenges and promises there are those who advance with confidence, but there are others who tread hesitantly, inhibited by self-doubts.

Still remembered is the US space shuttle Discovery flight on June 17, 1985 in which Prince Sultan Salman Abdul Aziz took part following an invitation from the American space agency to the Saudi Government.

There were debates then in Saudi Arabia as to whether it was proper for a Muslim to join the mission. One ulama had then asked the question: how is he going to perform his prayers in the space craft?

Yet other questions touching on theology were raised, and doubts were stilled only when Salman later enjoined, "It is a religious obligation to go out and discover the wonders that God has created".

In another context Dr Mahathir in his speech at the Oxford Centre on April 16 last year referred to the situation "not very long ago (when) Muslims considered even the printing of the Quran as forbidden (haram). For a long time the Turkish government which had bought a printing press was not allowed to use it. The Quran must be handwritten. Electricity was considered as haram for use in mosques. Mecca was lighted by oil lamps long after electricity brightened the cities of the rest of the world."

In a book published way back in 1929, Islam: Beliefs and Institution by H. Lammens there was reference to "lithographic reproduction of copies of the Quran, the printing of which is still a subject of scruple to timid believers".

Noted were the procedures for referring to the Holy Book and interpreting its verses, the first of which was the Sunnah or traditions of the Prophet and then through ijmak or universal consent. It became lawful to settle new cases by applying the rules laid down to meet analogous circumstances. Thus qias or analogy became a new root of the law. Finally there was recourse to ra'y or liberty of opinion, but it was considered exceptional.

There was reference also to the Kharijites, said to be the oldest Islamic sect, who opposed the prerogative of caliphate conferred to the Prophet's tribe, the Quraish. They maintained that leadership could not be the exclusive property of any tribe or family but must be chosen by votes of the believers, not excepting the negroes. They accepted, however, the legitimacy of the first two Caliphs.

In a matter relating to those of other faiths it was also said that "they will not reserve for non-Muslims the eternal torments of hell". In the discourse on Islamic jurisprudence the author touched on those who "see salvation only in servile adherence to the traditions of the Ancients".

The symposium in Kuala Lumpur is a continuation of the one organised by OCFIS at Ditchley Park in early October last year. One of its themes is "Misunderstanding of Islam by Muslims", and tomorrow's group discussions by international panelists will touch on political, economic and

religious/cultural dimensions of forging cooperation.

Noted in the Ditchley Park discussions was a general feeling among Muslims that Islam is regarded in the West as a threat, that Muslims are let to live on sufferance, instead of being welcomed, that they are admitted to the field only insofar as they accept rules of the play written and enforced by the West.

Reported recently in a British newspaper was an attack on Prince Charles over what was said to be his "uncritical" attitude to Islam. He was accused of turning a blind eye to what was said to be sufferings of Christians in Muslim countries.

The Prince's spokesman later explained matters in a letter. Quote: "The Prince of Wales has attempted to identify ways in which to build understanding between the Islamic and Western worlds rather than to feed the one-dimensional picture of Islam which obscures understanding".

As is known sections of the Western media pander to the "Islam-bashing" of certain organisations in their countries. This was admitted in a report in another British newspaper, "Since the 11th century, the conflict between Christianity and Islam has been our conflict so why should the Muslim trust us?"

Welcomed, therefore, is the topic in the symposium on "Islam and non-Muslims". Taken note by others would be recent demonstrations by some university students over the presence of the Israeli cricket team. This was followed by angry disclosures in a Bahasa Malaysia tabloid about a reported visit of a group of Israeli students to Malaysia.

Over time, however, Egypt and Jordan have signed treaties with Tel Aviv, and Israeli visitors have joined Western tourists in visits to ancient sites of the Pharaohs and to the sights and sounds of the Pyramids, and Cairo, home of Al-Azhar, Islam's most prestigious seat for learning. There have been no demonstrations in Jordan too.

In the meanwhile Muslim pilgrims pray at the Masjidil Aqsa in Israeli-administered Jerusalem, even though it is still a bone of contention with the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

Another timely topic is "Misunderstanding of Islam by Muslims". In a Muslim country such as Pakistan there are frequent clashes between the predominantly Sunnis and the minority Shiites. There have been shootings in mosques.

In Algeria, Muslim rebels are killing Muslims in the countryside and even women have been garrotted. In an interview with a Western newspaper some time ago a rebel spokesman spoke about his readiness to die for his cause. Death would be martyrdom, he said and added that 74 hours await him then in paradise! By such deeds and statements too are Muslims measured by others, and to gloss over it would be doubly demeaning.

Timely, therefore would be the theme "Fundamentalism versus Extremism among Muslims".

And surely unavoidable would be discussions on genetic engineering and cloning, not just of sheep but also of humans. Whether we are ready or not, the 21st century is barely three years away.

(END)