

20/08/1998

Islam a tolerant faith, says Al-Azhar Sheikh

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Islam preaches that its followers adopt moderation and stay away from extremism, the visiting Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar University Dr Mohamed Sayed Tantawi said today.

He said the teachings of Islam which were easy to understand and practise also called on adherents to live peacefully not only among themselves, but also with non-Muslims.

"There are many verses in the Quran which prove Islam is not a religion which calls for destruction and injustices, but one which insists on understanding and sincerity."

Mohamed Sayed was delivering a speech on Islam, A Simple and Moderate Religion to over 500 people at Pusat Islam.

He said the principles required Muslims to strike a balance between their material and spiritual needs, insisting both were important to a harmonious existence.

"Allah calls on us not to exhaust our energy just trying to achieve our spiritual needs, but also to seek the richness of this world, an effort which, if not performed, will deprive us of the means to do good."

Mohamed Sayed also said Muslims should seek knowledge in all fields, an endeavour he described as most crucial not only for the betterment of their lives, but also in meeting their spiritual needs.

Islam required its followers to use the richness and knowledge granted by God for good purposes and not otherwise.

"Allah does not approve those who use their time, efforts and wealth to commit destruction or slander."

Touching on relations with non-Muslims, Mohamed Sayed said Islam promoted tolerance and barred hostile conduct against others, except when there were threats to the religion or themselves.

"For example, there are specific provisions in Islam which guarantee the fundamental rights of non-Muslims who live amidst a Muslim society."

Answering a question from the audience on the status of Muslims who committed apostasy, he said he was of the opinion that they were free to do so as long as it did not harm the religion.

"There is no force in Islam. So there is no point forcing them to stay as this will only make them hypocrites."

"It's probably Allah's will to save us from worse harm which these people could have caused if they had remained in Islam," he said in Arabic.

His answer was translated into Bahasa Malaysia by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman.

Mohamed Sayed said actions against the apostates should be taken only if they had insulted the religion by word or conduct. He did not elaborate.

Mohamed Sayed, who arrived yesterday for a four-day visit, had an audience with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar at the Istana Negara later.

Invited by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the 70-year-old head of Egypt's famous university, also visited Kolej Agama Sultan Zainal Abidin in Kuala Terengganu today.

He is scheduled to visit the International Islamic University, Islamic Institute of Kedah Darul Aman in Alor Star, and meet officials of Bank Islam Malaysia Bhd and Tabung Haji (Pilgrims' Management and Fund Board).

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