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Perception the key to better relations

Dr Abu Bakar Abdul Majeed

AT the recently-concluded European Union-supported seminar on "Europe and the Islamic World", organised by Ikim and the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, one particular word was a favourite among both officials and participants: Perception.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who opened the seminar, in fact zeroed in on this when he said: "Conflicts of today and future clashes of civilisations between Europe and the Muslim world can be prevented if both improve their perceptions of one another and cast aside their distrust."

The problem of perception within Europe and the Islamic world is strongly linked to their love-hate relationship during the last 1,000 years or so.

Actually, encounters between the two helped to shape the world during the greater part of this millennia.

Many scholars agree that Europe was the natural heir to the Islamic civilisation which thrived between the eighth and 15th centuries.

Muslims excelled in major disciplines such as astronomy, medicine, mathematics, chemistry, geography, agriculture, commerce, industry, art, architecture, history and sociology.

Schools, libraries and hospitals became parts of mosque complexes. Scholars and researchers were respected and appreciated, regardless of their religious affiliations.

This strong commitment to knowledge acquisition and respect of the learned was a conviction picked up from the Greeks.

Thus, what the Muslims did as civilisational torch-bearers was to study, document and pass on their learning to the Europeans. The contribution of Muslims to science is an indisputable historical fact.

However, that the Muslims literally fuelled the rise of European civilisation is something some Europeans still loath loathe to admit.

History also bore witness that from the beginning, the European attitude towards Islam was fundamentally hostile.

Early Europeans, cut off from the main centres of Muslim civilisation by the Byzantine empire, built a vague, yet fantastic picture of Islam.

The great mass of the medieval polemic against Islam continued to be strengthened throughout the Renaissance and Reformation into the 18th century.

It cannot be denied, however, that during the Middle Ages there were already fruitful discussions and productive relationships between the Islamic world and Europe.

The cordial contact was not restricted to the academic per se, but extended to the military and trade realms.

For example, many European kings and high officials took great pains in maintaining contact with the Muslim world by sending envoys to the respective regions or inviting Muslim state representatives to their countries.

Charles, the great Kaiser of France and Germany, had a congenial relationship with the caliph, Harun al-Rashid, who sent him elephants, water clocks and other precious goods as a sign of goodwill. Later, in 1731, the first Muslim soldiers from Turkey, were drafted into the army of King Frederick William I of Prussia.

A year later, a prayer house was built for the soldiers right next to

the most important church in Prussia, the Garrison Church at Potsdam, near Berlin. King Frederick also ensured that his Muslim soldiers fulfilled their religious duties.

Frederick William's son, Frederick the Great, was asked shortly after ascending to the throne in 1740, whether a Catholic could buy land in a Protestant city. The king replied: "All religions are equal and good, provided their followers are true and sincere believers. And if Turks were to come and want to live in this country, we would build mosques for them."

Here is an excellent example of tolerance practised in a major European state more than 250 years ago. The tolerance Prussia showed Muslims was presumably founded on respect, esteem, and also empathy for people practising another religion.

And this type of feeling can only be felt by people who are confident, comfortable and steadfast in their own religion.

Only when one believes strongly in one's own religion will one be able to tolerate the others.

From the 18th century, the broader understanding of Islam was beginning to be fashioned. Napoleon's triumph at the Battle of the Pyramids, and the consequent occupation of Egypt in 1798, marked a dramatic change in the European attitude towards the Muslim world.

For the first time since the Crusades, Europeans walked as the conqueror, in the land of eastern Mediterranean.

Although the old European prejudices still survived, as they do today, Europeans then began to explore new attitudes ranging from a confident sense of superiority to a genuine desire to understand the motive force and achievement of Islamic civilisation.

Nevertheless, the uncompromising approach remained prominent. Sadly, the terms `Muslims' and `fanatic' became almost synonymous to Europeans confronting Muslim resistance in places as far apart as Algeria, India and Indonesia.

Meanwhile, the Islamic world started to decline in the late 17th century.

The unprecedented political, economic and social descent provided the context for a movement of internal renewal, of reform of religious practice, and of revival of religious high-spiritedness. This movement spread to almost every part of the Islamic world from the 18th century to the present day.

As Muslim power deteriorated, certain ulamak or Islamic jurists, who considered themselves as the guardians of the central tenets of Islam seized the opportunity and strove, as they never had done before, to promote a purer vision of Islamic life and society.

However, the ascendancy of these jurists did not spark the return to the true teachings of Islam. On the contrary, Islamic precepts were portrayed as rigid and doctrinaire. These fanatical jurists strongly adhered to the form, rather than the substance, of the religion.

The misguided jurists were trapped in the interpretation of the past which were actually no longer adequate, relevant or practical. Differences of opinions on maslahah or public interests issues are natural and healthy for the religion. The flexibility and intellectual freedom of Islam on these matters were not highlighted.

The teachings of Islam have also been politicised as a convenient tool to develop political power bases by self-centred individuals or groups, resulting in dividing Muslims into self-fulfilling bands of extremists and fanatics.

Sometimes, the fanatical revival movement collided with the expanding European influence and turned to give the intruder the full force of their

religious fury, adding in the process yet more lurid colours to the European understanding of Islam.

Thus, the task before us is a mammoth one, indeed.

The perception formed from these encounters is not easy to be altered.

Nevertheless there is a basis for positive thinking, as generally, European countries have come to grips with issues pertaining to the need of their Muslim minorities.

In fact, Muslims in Austria enjoy a relative freedom of expression, thanks to a 1905 treaty signed with the Ottoman empire. The Muslim community enjoys the rights of free airtime on government-owned television channels, religious education under the purview of the Muslim community, and the provision of a Islamic cemetery and permissible or halal slaughter house.

Similarly the Muslims' perception of Europeans should also change. Europe has now become home to almost 30 million Muslims, who have migrated from North Africa and southern, western and central Asia. These Muslim minorities must accept to live within the rule of the laws of their host nations.

According to the Quran, wherever they happen to live, in a majority or minority situation, Muslims have to be a factor for the development of a good and morally supreme society.

Each individual must strive for this posture of appeasement. When there is peace and tranquillity, everyone can perform the daily business of life as prescribed by God.

Thus, a sense of empathy of Europeans towards Muslims and vice-versa, can become the cornerstone of a renewed and the remarkable relationship between the two. Such symbiotic co-existence is imperative as we enter a new millennium.