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Feature-Tantawi

SHEIKH AL-AZHAR: A COLOSSUS IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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KUALA LUMPUR: The visit of the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Dr Mohammad Sayyed Tantawi, was brief but it was enough to leave a lasting impression on the Muslim community in the country, especially in a deeper understanding of Islam.

For example, his explanation on the present controversial apostasy issue had certainly shed new light on the thinking of the community, while making the non-Muslims realise that Islam is a religion of moderation.

To Dr Mohammad, a Muslim who renounced his faith or turned apostate should be left alone as long as he does not pose a threat or belittle Islam.

If the Muslims were forced to take action against the apostate, he said it should NOT be because he or she had given up the faith but because he or she had turned out to be an enemy or a threat to Islam.

Dr Mohammad, in his views, showed clearly how simple and moderate is Islam that is tolerant and not coercive on anybody.

At the same time, he repeatedly stressed on the need for Muslims to acquire traditional Islamic knowledge as well as the modern ones so that they could add to the strength of the Muslim community to defend the religion.

Islam, he said, not only asked its followers to concentrate on the hereafter but also to make acquire and use of all the rewards and riches of this world, to achieve happiness in the hereafter.

Dr Mohammad, who was a Mufti of the Egyptian government for about 10 years from 1986, has long been well-known for his courage in airing his frank views on various issues and problems confronting the Muslim world.

For example, the Egyptian dailies, including the famous Al Ahram quoted him early this year as saying that he supported the death penalty on those Palestinians who sold their lands to the Israelis.

To him, the penalty was apt because the sale of land by Palestinians to the Jews of Israel was high treason against the state, according to the Al Ahram report last May.

In his lectures while in Malaysia, Dr Mohammad defended Islam as a religion of tolerance and Muslims will not be the enemies of the non-Muslims so long as they do not threaten or be enemies of Islam.

His views on relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are particularly relevant to Malaysia, a multi-racial and multi-religious country.

The Grand Sheikh said in the eyes of Islam, the non-Muslims could be classified into three groups.

The first are those who do not live in the same country as the Muslims but they are not enemies of Islam whose followers are allowed to undertake exchanges of interests with these non-Muslims so long as these ties do not tarnish the image or the faith.

The second group also do not live in the same country as the Muslims but are opposed to Islam, like condemning or belittling the Muslims or the religion. In this case, the Muslims are allowed to fight against them but only to the extent of making them aware that they should not become enemies of Islam and Muslims.

The third group, which best describes the Malaysian context, are those non-Muslims who live in the same country as the Muslims and are not enemies of the faith. In this case, their rights and responsibilities are the same as the Muslims so long as they do not become enemies of Islam.

In the case of the third group, Sheikh al-Azhar reminded the Muslim community to continue with their missionary work among the non-Muslims to make them realise that Islam is the best faith to follow, but they should not be forced or compelled to embrace Islam.

On their quest for knowledge, he said Islam demands its followers to master all knowledge of the world and the hereafter, not least the technology of modern weapons to strengthen and defend the community and faith.

Mastery over modern weaponry, he said, was important to prepare for any eventuality or prejudices of the others, although Islam is a religion of peace that upholds love and good understanding.

Dr Mohammad's contribution to the awareness and development of the world Muslim community has long been recognised and appreciated by the International Islamic University (UIA) of Malaysia.

For this reason, he was chosen as the third recipient of the UIA President Award that also comes with a RM10,000 cash prize. His predecessors are the late Sheikh Mohammad Al Ghazali (1995) and Sheikh Dr Yusuf Abdullah Al-Qardawi (1996), all Colossus in the Muslim world.

Dr Mohammad, who was born in the village of Saleem Syarqiyyah in Egypt on Oct 28, 1928, showed his brilliance when he was able to recite the whole al-Quran while still in elementary school in his village.

He then went to the Al-Iskandariah religious institute for his secondary education in 1944 before enrolling in the Usuluddin Faculty of Al-Azhar University in Cairo in 1958.

He obtained his first degree with honours, his Masters in Education in 1959 and his Ph.D in 1966. His doctoral thesis was on the Jews in the al-Quran dan al-Sunnah.

Dr Mohammad had served in the Waqaf Ministry of Egypt till 1964 before being appointed a lecturer of his alma mater.

He was seconded to University Islam of Libya from 1972 to 1976, before being made Dean of his Usuluddin Faculty of Al-Azhar University (Asyut campus), Head of the Interpretation and Quranic Knowledge Department at the University of Islam in Madinah, Saudi Arabia (1980-1984) and a visiting lecturer of the Basrah University of Iraq.

In 1985, Dr Mohammad was appointed Dean of the Islamic Studies and Arab Language Faculty of al-Azhar University. On Oct 28, 1986 he was made the Mufti of the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt and on March 17, 1996, he became the Grand Sheikh of his alma mater, the oldest university in the world.

It was in his capacity as the Mufti of Egypt that he first visited Malaysia 10 years ago.

But his visit this time will be remembered for a common vision with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad -- that moderation, knowledge and sincere cooperation are among the aspects to emphasize in the faith in order to improve the image of Islam. -- Bernama

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