

31/12/1999

200 scholars attend religious conference

Ramlan Said

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - In an interesting acknowledgment of Malaysia's religious tolerance, some 200 scholars in Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism have converged here today to discuss their respective beliefs.

The three-day conference, themed Religion in the 21st Century: A Civilisational Prospective, is aimed at promoting world peace and inter-religious understanding in the 21st century through academic exchange and the study of religions.

It is jointly organised by the Association of Religious Studies Chihui Tang and Universiti Malaya's Department of Chinese Studies.

Held at the Palace of the Golden Horses in Seri Kembangan, the conference saw speakers also delving into religious integration and human civilisation, religious teachings and the preservation of peace in the body and mind, and religious texts and their interpretation.

Opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the conference has attracted experts who presented papers on a myriad of religious issues.

Among them were Harvard University professor of Chinese history and philosophy Prof Dr Tu Wei-ming; Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences centre for religious and cultural studies director Prof Pu Wen-qi; Chinese University of Hong Kong Department of Anthropology head Prof Dr Tan Chee-beng; and Taiwan National Tsinghua University Centre for General Education director Prof Dr Lin An-wu.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said while the diversity of religious practices in other countries had resulted in violent clashes, in Malaysia it had resulted in bringing the followers of different religions together.

"Malaysia's remarkable unity in diversity is the result of openness in the practice of the different religions and in particular the religion of the majority, the official religion of Islam."

Stressing that religions still had a role in the 21st century, the Prime Minister said the country's ability to ride out the recent economic slowdown was due partly to the people falling back on spiritual values.

Malaysians did not despair despite the recent economic slowdown due to their spirituality, he added.

"Calmed by our spiritual beliefs we were able to face the material problems of life, to understand and to overcome them. Without spiritual beliefs it is doubtful that we can overcome the challenges without becoming unbalanced."

Dr Mahathir believed societies without a religious anchor would despair in the face of problems.

"I believe that you are holding this conference at the right time. Many societies have discarded spiritual values and they often become unbalanced and feel lost when faced with the difficulties of life."

Noting that the focus of the conference was mainly on the religious beliefs of the Chinese, Dr Mahathir praised the organisers for including in the conference a paper on the wisdom of the Quran in modern times, saying it was important that Islam be given a hearing in a discussion on the role of religion.

The Prime Minister, who devoted a large part of his speech to explaining the reasons why Islam had become the most misunderstood religion of today, said it was misunderstood by both non-Muslims and Muslims.

Such was the misunderstanding of Muslims about their religion, he said, that they had erected a tall barrier against access to it even for non-Muslims.

Dr Mahathir said the lack of understanding among Muslims could be seen from the rejection of the Islamic concept and belief that all Muslims were brothers.

"Today, with the emergence of political parties, the practising Muslim members of certain parties are condemned as not being true Muslims and are treated worse than non-Muslims by members of the opposing political parties."

Muslim nations were often at war with one another, a state of affairs that could not be considered as brotherly, he added.

(END)