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Fear of secularism making Muslims backward: PM

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LACK of understanding of what secularism means within the Islamic context has resulted in Muslims becoming ignorant and backward, incapable of defending themselves, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said. He said separation between the secular and the religion may be possible in Christianity, but it is impossible in Islam.

"Islam is a way of life, and a way of life cannot be confined to pure worship and rituals only. It cannot be about the hereafter entirely. A way of life must involve everything that we do in our daily lives," Dr Mahathir said.

The Prime Minister said this when opening an international seminar on "The Role of Islamic Civilisation in Fostering Inter-Religious Understanding", organised by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim) in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said there is nothing secular about learning the sciences, the skills and the technologies that can contribute towards the well-being and the safety of the Muslims.

"Doing business and acquiring wealth is also for the well-being of the ummah in this world, for how else can the alms and the zakat be expected to help the needy," he added.

Dr Mahathir said merit for the hereafter does not come from the performance of various rituals and worship and the study of religious matters alone.

He said the Muslims' fear of secularisation had led them to try and insulate themselves from outside influence, physically isolating themselves from the non-Muslims.

"This they do by propagating the fear that contact with non-Muslims will lead to contamination of their religion and what they regard as their Islamic way of life. As a result, they do not contribute towards inter-religious understanding as was done by the early Muslims," Dr Mahathir said.

He said even in Malaysia today, there is a disturbing trend among religious teachers to influence children into avoiding contact with non-Muslims. This leads to a fear that association with non-Muslims will cause them to be contaminated with what is haram to Islam.

"This insulation and isolation will not help foster inter-religious understanding. Indeed, in multi-racial, multi-religious Malaysia, these Muslims are not going to be able to adjust and live harmoniously and benefit from the numerous and varied opportunities such an environment offers for the prosperity and advancement of the Muslims," Dr Mahathir said.

He said if Muslims are misunderstood and unable to create understanding of themselves and their religion, it is because they choose to create this misunderstanding by keeping themselves apart and so are unable to show the true teachings of Islam.

Dr Mahathir said the early Muslims were outgoing people who tolerated and associated closely with people of other religions. Islam teaches Muslims to accept that there are people of different faiths who worship in different ways.

"They are not asked to force these people to accept Islam. Obviously, they must tolerate and understand these non-believers, not regard them as enemies," he added.

Dr Mahathir said it is testimony to Muslim tolerance and understanding that in practically all countries ruled by Muslims there was and there still is a significant non-Muslim minority.

"If there are Muslims who seem not to be contributing towards inter-religious understanding today, it is not because of the Islamic civilisation or the Islamic religion. It is because circumstances have given rise to many misinterpretation and deviations from the true teachings of Islam and because Islamic civilisation has declined somewhat," he added.

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