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Taking up Dr M's challenge

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OUR Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is among the few modern Muslim leaders who are also thinkers. Over the last few years he has made many important speeches at national as well international fora on Islam.

Most people would remember his excellent speech at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies on April 15, 1996 where he called upon Muslims to go back to the fundamentals of their religion, reject the outdated classical interpretations and reinterpret those fundamentals in the light of modern conditions.

Last week, he spoke in London on the future of Muslims in the new century. Although he has always been critical of present-day Muslims, his London speech shows a gloomy pessimism that was not so obvious before and that will not sit easily with the essential optimistic world-view of Islam.

Listen to this: "I try very hard to be optimistic about the Muslims in the 21st century of the third millennium of the Christian Era. But I must admit that it is very difficult for me to be optimistic.

"I find few Muslims understand reality. They live in a make-believe world where weakness is regarded as strength, where failures are regarded as success... I am sorry I am unable to see the renaissance of the Muslim Civilisation in the 21st Century.

"We have not yet awakened to the realities of the Industrial Age, much less the Information Age. A few of us have, but we are too few and we are not in a position to do much. These few will effectively live in exile. More will be joining them with the passage of time."

The last paragraph of his speech throws a challenge to those Muslims who think otherwise and lets in an opening of hope. He said: "I hope there are others who can show positively that the 21st Century will see the beginning of the return of the great Muslim Civilisation. I would like to be convinced by them, so I and other Muslims may contribute whatever we can to the revival."

In the limited space here, I would like to take up Dr Mahathir's challenge.

The deplorable conditions of the Muslim ummah that he paints are sadly true. His call that Muslims go back to the religion's fundamentals and interpret them in the light of modern conditions is also correct.

What is needed is a methodology whereby this transformation can be carried out. Under the right conditions, I believe this transformation can be carried out within one, or at most two, generations.

Before discussing this, I would like to return to the question of pessimism. It can be seen that gloom presently engulfs not only the Muslim ummah. It embraces the whole modern civilisation.

After the collapse of Soviet communism in 1989-90, now it is the turn of Anglo-American liberalism to go under. Francis Fukuyama was premature in declaring liberalism's triumph. There is the threat of a general war, including thermo-nuclear war, breaking out from various fire-storms that are raging on all the continents: Middle-East, Europe, Central Asia, South Asia and South America.

The Anglo-American financier oligarchy is gripped by panic at the looming inevitable collapse of their system that they are prepared to risk a Third World War to stop the collapse.

Yet, as Muslims, we are told by God not to despair. Surah 12, Verse 87

states: "Do not despair of God's mercy. None despairs of God's mercy except the disbelieving people." Again: "Say, `O My servants who have exceeded limits, never despair of God's mercy. God forgives all sins. He is the Forgiver, Most Merciful.'" (Quran, 39: 53)

Being the best group of people ever to be raised among mankind, as God describes believers in Him to be (see Quran, 3:110), we should work very, very hard to build a new civilisation from the ruins of multiple civilisations of the old world: the materialist civilisations of liberalism and communism and the ascetic civilisation of clerical Islam.

As we know, the brilliant Muslim civilisation of the 7th through to 13th centuries was brought down by the class of theologian-clerics, who taught Muslims to disregard the present world and concentrate on the Hereafter, who took over the religion from that time onwards.

In his brave speech at Oxford, Dr Mahathir correctly diagnosed the disease. He had said: "The people who are usually described as fundamentalists are far from following the fundamentals of the Islamic religion. On the contrary, they are people who reject the teachings of Islam or who deviate from them. Most of them have seemingly reverted to the pre-Islamic jahilliah ways of extreme loyalty to their group, to fanaticism or ta'asub."

In his London speech, Dr Mahathir points out that the class of theologian-clerics are currently advancing in Malaysia. Lest we think that they will last, we should remember one thing that the theologian-clerics do not have is the truth.

The religion that they are preaching is based on myth and falsehood. The myth is that they are the heirs of the Prophet and that they are infallible. The falsehood is that those who support them will go to heaven.

Both myth and falsehood will be cleared up soon by the emergence of truth, and truth, God has assured us, will triumph over falsehood. (See Quran, 17: 81.)

We must debunk their propaganda that it is only they who can speak about religion. In Islam there is no priesthood, as in Christianity. Everyone has the right to speak and every concerned one must speak up. We must uphold only the truth. Falsehood must be totally rejected.

The Islam that all prophets from Adam to Muhammad taught us is simple: "Believe in God and do good." Numerous verses of the Quran declare this. (See for instance 2:25, 82, 112; 46:13 and 98:7-8.)

The Quran also details for us the good that is to be done, and the bad that is to be avoided, and they are not very many. The theologian-clerics have invented a new religion that is almost impossible to practise and that has nothing to do with the true Islam. That is why their brand of Islam is not progressing.

A futuristic dialogue reported in the Quran goes like this: "The day they are thrown into hell, they will say, `Oh, we wished we had obeyed God and we had obeyed the messenger.' They will also say, `Our Lord, we had obeyed our masters and leaders, but they had led us astray.'" (33:66-67)

Those among us who care for the true Islam must stand up and expose these hawkers of religion so that our people can be saved from the divine destruction that awaits us if we do not.

The new world system that must emerge from the ruins cannot but be other than the system of truth. That is what true Islam is: the truth, embodied in God's Word. The Quran has declared, "He it is Who sent His messenger with guidance and the religion of truth that he may cause it to prevail over all religions, though the idolaters are averse." (9:33)

It also states, "God speaks the truth and He shows the way." (33:4) Belief in God also means belief in the truth of Islam and in the truth of

God's Word.

As Dr Mahathir has also pointed out, the Quran is not as easy to understand as it seems at first. This has led to differing classical interpretations. One of the verses that has been misinterpreted to favour the theologians is the famous verse on the question of loyalty.

The verse (without interpolation) goes: "O you who believe, you shall obey God and you shall obey the messenger and those in charge among you. If you dispute in any matter, you shall refer it to God and the messenger, if you believe in God and the Last Day. This is better for you and provides you with the best solution." (4:59).

Traditional interpretation points to three authorities, i.e. God, meaning the Quran, the messenger, meaning the Sunnah/Hadith of the Prophet, (note that this is an interpolation) and ulil-amr, meaning the religious authority (note that this is an arbitrary subjective interpretation).

The real meaning of the verse, taking Quranic teachings as a whole, is that basic loyalty is due to God and His messenger (i.e. the Quran) and secondary loyalty is due to whoever is in authority in the particular context.

In the national context, it refers to the Government. This secondary authority can make additional laws to carry out God's commands, but no law can countermand God's commands.

The difficulties in understanding the Quran is not so much due to its Arabic language, but rather to its multi-layered contexts. The Quran is both historical and universal. It is also meant for people of differing levels of social and moral development.

The Quran is also couched in metaphor and in allegorical language, which can only be understood in reference to the Quran's total teachings as well as in reference to many branches of knowledge.

The classical interpreters naturally interpreted the Quran according to the knowledge of their times and in accordance with their historically-bound understanding.

We cannot blame them for the mistakes they may have made. Being human and historically-bound, they probably had no choice but to act the way they did. The blame is on those who came after and followed them blindly.

We are today a thousand or seven hundred years away from them. It is only natural and logical that we should review their interpretations so as to keep abreast with the development of knowledge, social development and the development of moral consciousness.

It is the failure to do so (due to the so-called closing of the door of ijtihad) that Muslims now find themselves left behind, confused and lost.

To solve this problem of interpretation, we have to work out, from the teachings of the Quran itself, a scientific method of Quranic interpretation.

The Egyptian scholar and reformer, Muhammad Abduh, was the first to point out to the principle of self-interpretation of the Quran. This writer has tried to work out such a methodology in his 1992 book, *Hadis - Jawapan Kepada Pengkritik*.

Let us go to Prophet Muhammad's example to gain some insight as to how to run a Muslim administration. As we know, he promulgated the Medina Charter to run the city-state of Medina.

He in fact set up the first nation-state in history, structured as a federation with a central government with himself as head, with equal rights for its plural-society citizens, consisting of Muslims, Jews and pagans, with complete religious freedom, with religious rites and customary matters administered by each autonomous province, but with questions of war and peace, security and justice directly under the

central government.

It should be noted that he separated religion, interpreted as rites of worship, from state matters. Thus his concept of government is secular in the sense that religion, as rights of worship, are regarded as particular to a community, not in the sense of politics being divorced from morality.

This is in line with Quranic teaching enshrined in 22:67 which states: "For each community, We institute rites of worship which they follow. Do not let yourself be drawn into dispute in this matter. Call to your Lord, for surely you are on the right path."

Muhammad completed his mission of transforming pagan Arabia into a united submitting people, who were swiftly to conquer the then world, in 23 years! The miracle can, of course, be repeated, but it has to be done by believers who are capable of acting as masters of their own destiny (being vicegerents of God on Earth), striving hard to bring about a just world, fearing none, and submitting only to God.

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