

27/11/2001

Faiths in harmony

P.C. Shivadas

MALAYSIA, a Muslim country, stands out like a beacon for the rest of the world in inter-faith understanding among its citizens.

And, according to Dr Allan Mott Keislar, who has made it his life's mission to promote such understanding, of all Muslim countries it is "probably the closest to the spirit of the Holy Prophet in terms of attitude towards other religions".

At a recent gathering organised by IKIM or the Institute for Islamic Understanding, which he attended while on a brief stop-over here, he heard Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad explain Government attitude towards the different faiths in the country.

"As opposed to the vast majority of politicians I have come in contact with, I feel Dr Mahathir is really interested in promoting the good of this country in terms of God consciousness," says Keislar.

"The whole programme I attended was on tolerance and I could see he was very sincere. Certainly it is tied with national interest but he understands very well that Islam is not and should not be promoting religious bigotry.

"There are few countries in the world that are at one and the same time religious and tolerant.

"That is why I see Malaysia as one of the best places in the world for interfaith understanding."

The most important aspect of that understanding was for people of different religions to see the validity of not only their own religion but also that of others.

All religions are part of God's plan for humanity and only if seen in that light will we behave like a family with one father. Religions are different paths to bring us back to God.

Although Buddhists do not dwell on God, this does not negate their faith based on the teaching of the Buddha. Keislar felt the Buddha should be regarded at least as an authority worthy of respect.

Buddha, he ventured to say, did not teach about God because the people at that time were not ready and interested in serving God.

People at that time had extended debates about God. They prided themselves on defeating others with their skill and logic.

Buddha did not see any divine purpose in this and refused to be drawn into any argument or useless debate.

But the principles he taught were identical to those of other religions. He was a bona fide authority and Buddhists in accepting him should be able to accept the authority of other religions.

Keislar recalled that when the Charter was being drawn up for the United Religions Initiative in the United States a few years ago, a Buddhist representative said if the word God was included, the Buddhists would not join.

At the same time an Episcopal bishop said if the word God was not used, he would not join. In the end a compromise was reached. The word God was dropped.

Keislar saw this as one reason why conservative people of all religions shied away from inter-faith movements.

"They have not even begun to consider the possibility of approaching inter-faith because they think it is not the will of God since God has not been put in the centre.

"I am not overly optimistic in the short term that inter-faith understanding will happen easily or quickly but I think in the long run it will because all other approaches will come up short.

"So the more this is clarified now the more people will be willing to listen to it later when their attempts to harmonise religions without putting the God in the centre do not bear the fruit desired."

He saw URI as best run by a group of saintly, self-realised people from different faiths. Such people, he felt, would be humble in their approach and their decisions would be binding.

On the other hand if the representatives were elected, they would end up trying to understand and cater to their constituents and this may not be for the better.

A case in point was the limited success of the United Nations which was set up to bring peace after a devastating war. It was not working as hoped because it did not have a selfless authority in the Security Council.

Council members were more concerned about protecting their own interests in addressing conflict resolution.

Keislar believed success in human life depended on God consciousness. The greater the consciousness the greater the success.

Leaders who were God conscious would pray for guidance intelligence, courage patience and wisdom. And since God heard all prayers, He would answer them if they were sincere.

In democratic countries people simply had to become God conscious and pick God conscious leaders. This was the solution for all the problems plaguing the world.

People must call upon the name of God or His representative as a daily practice. If God was pleased with the sincerity of efforts to bring people closer to Him, He would provide everything.

But if people became puffed up and did not turn to God, their problems would go on increasing until there was complete surrender to the will of God. "It is as simple as that," said Keislar.

Note: Keislar, a biologist-turned-theologian, teaches history of interfaith dialogue at the University of California and the Graduate Theological Seminary Berkeley.

He is a disciple of Swami Prabhupada, founder of the Hare Krishna movement.

* The writer can be contacted at features@nstp.com.my

(END)