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`Engage in dialogue'

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A NOTED newspaper columnist once said a great irony of religion is in how it preached unity through disunity. This is because religion virtually divided people into believers and non-believers and the unity among believers is due to their adoption of a certain set of beliefs, which is different from others.

Political scientists argue that one of the reasons for the separation of church and state in modern-day government is because religion-based politics divides society into classes with separate laws and regulations for each class.

Muslims frequently fall into the trap of demarcating legal and psychological borders between themselves and non-Muslims, even though some Muslim intellectuals such as Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi say that the ummah refers to not only the Muslim community but also those who are not adherents of Islam.

Dr Farhan Nizami, director of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in the United Kingdom, is one who subscribes to the belief that Muslims should contribute not only to themselves and to their community, but also to humanity.

He says the real challenge for Muslims is not only to rediscover their historical heritage and contribute to Muslim society, but to go beyond that, as befits the role of a "vice-regency on earth".

"And so the good that Muslims can bring to this world should not be confined to any one locality or any one country or any one province," he told the New Straits Times in an interview recently.

He was on a visit, arranged by the British High Commission, during which he gave lectures on the role of inter-faith and inter-communal dialogues in the United Kingdom and the role of Muslims in British society.

Farhan has been at the forefront of efforts to encourage Muslims to reach out to other communities through inter-faith dialogue, as a way of not only nurturing understanding between different communities, but also as a means of getting Muslims involved in the mainstream of society.

He says Malaysia is an important example of a modern Muslim country where religious tolerance has provided space for Muslims to express their identity and practise their beliefs, while gaining the loyalty of the non-Muslim populace.

"I also think what is important in the Malaysian context is where it seeks religious harmony by protecting the aspirations and hopes of those citizens who may not be Muslim. This generates the confidence and loyalty of all its citizens."

Therefore, he says, it is only natural that Muslims in this country play their rightful role in the service of Islam.

"In terms of progress in the economic area and the advances made in education... (it again) shows Malaysia is a very important example.

"Of course, with the forthcoming Islamic summit (Organisation of Islamic Conference to be hosted by Malaysia next year) and other major initiatives that have been undertaken in this country, there are some very positive signs."

In this respect, he says, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has played a leading role in voicing the concerns and interests of Muslim countries.

"Well, he has been a very dynamic leader in the last 20 years or so.

Indeed, he has a very good track record of playing more than a leading part in the international arena," he says of Dr Mahathir.

On the question of Islam being seen as a religion that promotes extremism and discrimination, Farhan feels that this is a case of ignorance and prejudice.

"I don't think that we should impart respectability to the ignorance of (such) people by responding to such allegations. I think if someone is ignorant enough to think that Islam equals terrorism, then I am afraid there's not much that can be done about it."

According to him, Islamic civilisation has proven to be the most plural of civilisations. The diversity of language, of values or dress and style, can be seen throughout the world today.

"It never had a problem with difference or diversity. Now this cannot be said of other civilisations which had problems with and could not accommodate difference.

"You don't have to go far, we can just look at the encounter between Western civilisation and indigenous Australia and what happened there. Or what happened to the natives of the Americas."

But in order for Muslims to contribute to the world, they must reach out and engage in dialogue among themselves and particularly with those of other communities.

Such dialogue, Farhan says, is also part of what Islam enjoins Muslims to.

"Muslims are required to engage in humility and civility with others and any dialogue which involves people of other faiths should be based on religious conviction itself."

He adds that Muslims should not see themselves in a tribal relationship with the world, especially with the West.

It is a known fact that Islamic advances in mathematics, astronomy and medicine contributed much to the scientific revolution and the Renaissance in Europe.

"Muslims have contributed much to what is known as Western civilisation. Yes, during the last century perhaps not as much as they should have," Farhan says, adding that as long as Muslims were content to be consumers of ideas and goods, they would always be on the back row.

Instead of looking at the West as an entity to be despised, rivaled or clashed with, Muslims should see themselves as being in a position to contribute to it.

"Western civilisation in a sense, has lost its way and I think that people of faith, I can only speak for Muslims, but I am sure people of other faiths would share this view, that one has to rediscover the sacredness in our lives."

The secularism and materialism that in many ways have been the "religion" of the Western world may have led to what some have called the creation of a spiritual vacuum in the lives of its citizens.

Farhan believes that Muslims are in a position to restate the case for the sacred in life, by reminding themselves and others that the purpose of life may be different from the concerns of life.