

08/12/2002

Detoxify the mind of bigotry

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BY fasting in the month of Ramadan, Muslims learn to empathise with the deprived and marginalised.

And this week, as the 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide celebrate Hari Raya Aidilfitri, this lesson is further reinforced for it is a time when the bond of brotherhood irrespective of creed, colour or ethnicity is enhanced through the spirit of sharing.

Outside the holy sites in Mecca, nowhere is this better demonstrated than in Malaysia, through the practice of rumah terbuka or open house.

This type of sharing is uniquely Malaysian, virtually unheard of in other parts of the globe.

In fact, elsewhere, the situation has worsened of late. In the United States, hate crimes against people because of their ethnicity or national origin have risen sharply since Sept 11, 2001.

According to the FBI, Muslims and those of Middle Eastern ethnicity were the ones most targeted (USA Today, Nov 26). Even turbaned Sikhs and bearded South Asians were not spared.

Reportedly, whites made up the vast majority of offenders, followed by blacks, and they were involved in assaults, intimidation, murder, manslaughter and arson.

Incidents targeting Muslims, previously the least common involving religious bias, jumped 1,700 per cent during 2001, according to US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The group also cited a US Justice Department study that found an estimated 75 per cent of hate crimes go unreported.

But long before the 9-11 tragedy, the Muslim community was often subjected to abuse, as exemplified by events following the Iran hostage crisis, the 1991 Gulf War, and the bombing of USS Cole. It was harassed even in cases where its involvement was still doubtful, for example after the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City, or following the crash of a TWA flight the year after.

A 41-page HRW report "We Are Not the Enemy" ([hrw.org/reports/2002/ushate](http://hrw.org/reports/2002/ushate)) last month took the US authorities to task for not doing enough to stem the backlash following the Sept 11 attacks. It reckoned the authorities should have anticipated the reaction, given the historical backlash against Muslims and Arabs for the last 20 years in relation to Middle East conflicts.

In other words, the insensitive, blanket responses blamed on a group of people of specific race and faith should have been better managed.

President George Bush himself was quite categorical about this. In a recent visit to the mosque at the Islamic Centre of Washington, he was quoted as saying "Islam is peace" and admonished Americans not to vent their anger on innocent American-Arabs and Muslims (IHT, Oct 8).

Similar appeals were made in the aftermath of 9-11, but did not get sustained media attention. Instead, widespread publicity was given to the obnoxious remarks of some celebrated US religious leaders (and one lesser known Australian clergyman).

Franklin Graham, son of Billy, branded Islam a "very evil and wicked religion". Jerry Falwell, on CBS' 60 Minutes denounced the Prophet of Islam as "a terrorist" and "a violent man".

Evangelist Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, said that to think Islam is "a peaceful religion is fraudulent". The one-time

presidential hopeful branded the Prophet as "an absolute wild-eyed fanatic, a robber and brigand, and a killer".

Such toxic remarks poison the mind and promote bigotry, leading to more hate crimes. A case in point is the sectarian violence in places as far away as India that killed five people in protest of Falwell's remarks.

In fact, the obnoxious name-calling is in stark contradiction to Pope John Paul II's message for "an open sensitivity to the values of various cultures in relation to the evangelical message" (NST, Dec 1).

Moreover, as noted by the IHT, quoting the Washington Post: "These are not just the words of the fringe movement. The speakers are leaders of the religious right, a movement close to a President who speaks their language, and who can count Bush as one of their own."

Though Bush eventually denounced the remarks, he fell short of repudiating his "closest political allies" by name for fear of alienating his "crucial voting blocs", suggests ABCnews.com (Oct 28).

The result leaves one questioning: "If the Government doesn't trust these people, then why should I?"

More worrying is that despite the seeming tolerance for Islam, the US President himself is increasingly alienating the international Muslim community with his war on terror.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in reference to Australia: "It's not a campaign against terrorists, but against Muslims." Most Muslims share the view.

Still, there is a greater concern that "while the Government is pounding the pulpit of tolerance with the right hand, that with the left hand it is pushing aside the very American traditions of equality", HRW was quoted as saying.

This refers to the extreme measures recently adopted; antiterrorism efforts largely directed at Muslims, Arabs and South Asians alike, including secret detentions (more than 1,000 of them), the decision to fingerprint and handcuff, as well as the effort to question over 5,000 Middle Eastern men.

As Raja Zarith Idris suggested in her column "On Common Ground" last week, Malaysians, and Muslims in particular, must actively take a lead role in fostering better inter-religious understanding for the world to emulate.

As a nation, it is time to move from the symbolic gesture of open house to that of open hearts and minds by rejecting all toxic, hate-in-citing messages on any issue that threatens our treasured unity.

Wishing our readers a lifetime of sharing, happiness and peace. Selamat Hari Raya.

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