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The struggle for the soul of Islam

IN the aftermath of the Sept 11 tragedy, there is a struggle for the soul of Islam, not only in the Muslim countries but also in the Muslim communities in America and Europe.

Moderate Muslims struggle with the radicals like the Taliban to interpret and represent Islam. It is a struggle heightened by the fact that the contemporary socio-political, economic, geopolitical, moral and cultural conditions of the Muslims mock the very idea of Muslims as khalifatullah (God's vicegerents).

As pointed out in the Mahathir Dialogue on Advancement of the Ummah, today's Islam is characterised by inwardness. Postnational Islamic movements take the myopic view that the hudud - not the public interest of Muslims - is the ultimate goal of political action. They forget that Islam is more than the sum total of the hudud. This is at the origin of many false dilemmas, disunity among the ummah and culture of hate in Muslim societies. It is sad that in the name of Islam, the political culture prevailing in these countries has visibly moved towards politics of confrontation, mistrust, mutual recriminations, violence, polarisation and power-seeking as an end in itself.

Post Sept 11, Islam has been demonised by the West. But it is equally true that its demonisation is also done by those Muslims who exhort that God is the supreme gangster or one must perform supplementary prayers a hundred times a day to atone for one's sins and that the modesty of the veiled women is more precious than the blood of martyrs. Symbolism - hijab, hudud and the obsession with the thought of past scholars to the point that its relevance or otherwise in today's milieu is ignored - is not a magic wand that would instantly restore the lost glory of the Islamic civilisation. The glory of Islam was not lost in a day and it will not be recaptured in a short time or in buzzwords such as Islamic state and hudud.

The decline of Islam was geopolitical and economic, never epistemological. This has escaped the understanding of many Muslims who assumed that focus on the theological dimensions of Islam such as fiqh and usulluddin but nothing else on what is crudely-defined as "secular knowledge" will restore the lost glory. They operate under the assumption that the syariah is a static body of fiqh in the 1st and 2nd century of Islam. Thus, the rejection of independent reasoning (ijtihad) as antisyariah and the wilful neglect of the pursuit of knowledge.

Islam's post-Sept 11 challenge is the need for moderate Muslims to occupy the public space in their respective countries. American and European Muslims must participate in America's and Europe's mainstream while their brethren in Muslim countries must reach out to both the English-educated and the rural folk who may be easily swayed by the inflammatory speeches of the extremists. There must be a policy of containment towards those who seek to advocate hatred towards any community. But barring legislative measures, this requires the moderates to speak against any bigoted and distorted comments. Made-in-America imams or made-in-Malaysia imams will ensure the promotion of liberal and tolerant Islam since it eliminates the need for importing orthodox imams from places like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

The challenge is for moderate Muslims to enact a bridge of understanding, dialogue and peace in their countries. For American Muslims

and European Muslims, the Muslim world is their origin but America or Europe is their destiny. If moderate Muslims do not serve as harbingers of harmony and the promoters of peace, they will be betraying their past and destroying their future.