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A modern return to fundamentals

IN Algeria recently, Prime Minister Datuk Dr Mahathir Mohamad was praised for being a good Muslim leader and for moulding Malaysia into a model Muslim country. Asked for the secret of Malaysia's success, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia believes in being fundamentalist Muslim.

This is not the first time Dr Mahathir has referred to himself and the community as such. This self-admission of fundamentalism may be confusing to many who wrongly equate the term with religious militancy and a rejection of modernity. But it simply means a return to the true teachings of Islam. A majority of Muslims, be it political Islamists or liberals, would agree with Dr Mahathir's definition and that such a return is necessary to arrest the worldly decline of the ummah.

That being the case, why then the schism between the two categories of Muslims? The problem lies not in the definitional framework of the term but in the content poured into the framework. While some correctly perceive the return as an embrace of the scriptural norms, they unfortunately make too many concessions to the forces of obscurantism. This, as witnessed in many parts of the Islamic world, results in dangerous mental cleavages, backwardness in the system of education, fruitless and mindless self-censorship and moral policing, and the impoverishment of creativity in intellectual and cultural life. Imprisoned by medievalist thinking, Muslim countries encountered a modernist crisis.

Consequently, fundamentalism is mistakenly said to banish reason from religion and compassion from faith and its traits are anti-intellectualism, intolerance, insularity, arrogance, intellectual bankruptcy and moral blindness. But as pointed out by Dr Mahathir to his rapt audience in Algeria, true Islamic teachings encourage modernisation. "There is no such conflict if you go to the fundamentals of Islam," he said. In his simple but clear way of enunciating principles, Dr Mahathir said the Quran requires Muslims to defend themselves. "In the days of the Prophet, this meant having enough horses, bows and arrows." But today, it is impossible to defend oneself with such primitive weaponry, he said.

Obviously, modern military equipment is necessary but to make or obtain and use them entails the acquisition of knowledge and the exploration of new technological frontiers. Knowledge is integral to self-defence and advancement. As Dr Mahathir has often reminded, the Quran speaks in parables, the real meaning of which must be interpreted in the context of the situation faced by the ummah through the ages.

But those schooled in the exegetical tradition insist on the literal meaning of the Quranic words. And so the defence capacity of the ummah is lost to the literal need for steeds of war as stated in Sura VIII:60, "Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror to the enemies." Today's misinterpretation of what constitutes fundamentalism provides neither the educational, cultural and technological resources nor the will-power to deal with the malaise afflicting the ummah.

The fatal error of the Muslims is to think of Islam as historically complete or perfect and thus to deny the pursuit of knowledge.