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Clouded by obscurantism

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WHEN scholars gather to discuss a contentious issue, you would expect them to do so with patience, tolerance and a good grasp of background facts.

Even if there is no consensus on the matter, you would assume that men and women of intellect would be open to differences of opinion.

At the very least, they should treat one another with civility and respect.

But the organisers of the Second International Muslim Leaders' Consultation on HIV/AIDS held in Kuala Lumpur last week were disappointed on all counts by some of the delegates.

Themed "The Caring Ummah: Transforming the Response", the gathering of Muslim scholars, ulama, and social workers was an urgent attempt to find solutions for millions of Muslims around the world with HIV/AIDS.

The five-day event started well, but things went wrong on the second day when a clutch of delegates took exception to the views expressed by a speaker.

They were so deeply offended by her ideas that they accused her of blasphemy, demanded her paper be expunged and that she be thrown out of the conference.

The group claimed that Dr Amina Wadud, a theologian from the US, had vilified the religion, questioned the Quran and insulted Muslims.

When they were prevented from speaking up (due to the conference format and time constraints), they heckled, harangued and bellowed their way through the sessions.

One delegate said that "preserving religion was more important than preserving life".

Another, a Kenyan woman of Pakistani descent, managed to slip in a left hook at Malaysia. "In a truly Islamic country," she said to Amina, "where Syariah is the law of the land, you would have been given three days to repent. And if you didn't, a fatwa would be issued on you."

The majority of participants and observers were mortified by the vitriol poured on Amina.

Some Malaysian delegates even wondered if the Federal Reserve Unit should be called in to preserve calm.

Many were stunned by the invective used against Amina. One of her abusers went so far as to suggest that the "Jews may have got to her".

"I didn't realise religious people could be so rude," said a participant whose perception of scholars was shattered thereafter.

"I am speaking for Allah," said one delegate shouting at the top of his voice.

"Shut up! You think you're the only one speaking for Allah? I am speaking for Allah too," said another.

Amina's defenders said that her paper was written for an academic audience; as such, they summarily dismissed the attackers as "lay-people".

They also said the kerfuffle was an act of demagoguery and the delegates who mis-interpreted her writings were "enthusiastic apologists for the religion suffering from historical amnesia".

Although Amina retracted her paper on the fourth day and a Gambian imam publicly apologised to her in person, the issue simmered on till the last.

The delegates who were dissatisfied that she was not expelled, spent long hours outside the main conference hall, colluding in corners.

There were also complaints about the local organising committee headed

by Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir. Her committee, it was said, comprised individuals who were "not Muslim enough" to handle the issues.

There were also demands that all papers be vetted by the religious authorities before delivery.

A flurry of Press statements were given out and mini-Press conferences held to ensure that reporters understood the positions held by each side.

An interesting observation made by several delegates was that the dissenters were highly organised and able to come up with typed statements in a short time.

During a chaotic moment, an observer wryly commented that "this is why HIV/AIDS will always remain a major problem in Muslim communities".

In the end, Amina was not the only hitch in this long and fractious meeting.

Some delegates refused to recognise that the widening gap between realities on the ground and the responses (or lack thereof) by the ulama may be due to an inflexible and literal understanding of the religion.

This was made abundantly clear in a third-day session on youth-related issues where a line was doggedly drawn between people who acquired the virus through drug usage or blood transfusion, and those who contracted it through sex.

This led to a strong counter-statement by transsexuals and homosexuals who were frontliners in the global fight to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS in their respective communities and countries.

"Are you saying we don't exist? Are we not Muslims too?" said one transsexual.

In most of the sessions, speakers from countries ranging from Pakistan and Bangladesh to South Africa highlighted the need to suspend moral judgment and show tolerance, acceptance and care towards those infected.

As one Malaysian Health Ministry delegate said: "If I made a mistake 10 years ago and I have suffered from it, why is society so cruel as to judge me still? Surely people can be more compassionate".

As it was, there was little evidence of compassion. Further complaints were made about the discussion of "un-Islamic" topics like abortion, the use of condoms and reproductive health.

Some observers said the resistance was not a surprise. What was disappointing was the mean-spirited manner in which defences were put up.

In their determination to protect Islam, the resisters also demonstrated a lack of genuine understanding of what it is to be human.

One scholar said the humiliating moments in the HIV/AIDS conference should be viewed in a larger context, that is, a clash taking place within the Muslim community itself.

"It is a clash between lay-people who are ardent but ignorant followers of the religion and scholars who have spent years studying the religion from every conceivable angle.

"Just because you love Islam, it doesn't mean you can lecture on it," he said, in a not-so-oblique reference to the delegates who accused Amina of blasphemy.

And if someone does not share your views on the religion, it does not necessarily mean the person is wrong or against Islam, he added.

The scholar said everything that was raised by "the genuine scholars in this conference was backed by classical and historical documents from within Islamic history itself".

Valiant attempts were made to salvage the conference - especially by the younger delegates - and to bring it back to the theme.

But the bigotry displayed suggests that in the fight to contain and control HIV/AIDS, religion - in its most literal sense - remains part of the problem, not the solution.

