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Correct interpretation of Islam vital for Muslims, says Dr M

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PUTRAJAYA, Thurs. - Muslim scholars from the various sects and schools of thought must unite for the sake of Islam and its 1.3 billion followers, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said they should cast aside differences of interpretation and move forward to defend the religion and community.

The Prime Minister said the task of bringing back the past glory of the Islamic civilisation depended mainly on scholars guiding Muslims through the correct interpretation of Islam.

Opening the inaugural World Conference of Islamic Scholars with the theme "Islam in the Era of Globalisation" at Marriot Hotel here, Dr Mahathir said by virtue of being the most influential group in the Muslim community, scholars were capable of changing the Muslim mind in any direction.

Addressing more than 900 Muslim scholars and thinkers from 33 countries, Dr Mahathir said the fate of the Muslims today was the result of their own doing, including the failure to practise the true teachings of Islam.

Presenting history as the best referral for Muslims to resuscitate their religion, he pointed to the various stages of Islamic civilisation in the religion's 1,400 years of history and how division among the Muslims brought them down.

"The great ulama of history were truly learned people with only an interest in seeing that Islam was interpreted correctly. However, even these great ulama differ in their interpretations of Islam. This has resulted in schisms among the Muslims, so deep that many sects cannot be reconciled to this day.

"Thus we have the division between the Sunnis and the Shias. Their differences have led to frequent wars between them. But the Sunnis and the Shias are again divided by the different teachings of their imam, who were great scholars, or ulama.

"Then there are the different schools or mazhabs of Islam which have resulted in further subdivisions into Tarikats, with peculiar beliefs including the practice of going into a trance as part of their religious rituals. All these groups and beliefs emerge because different ulama interpret and teach the religion differently," he said.

Dr Mahathir said at present, anybody could claim to be an ulama and were entitled to make interpretation or pronouncement on Islam, thus leading to further divisions in the community and cautioned Muslims against easily accepting anyone who claimed to be an ulama as a genuine scholar.

"These pretenders have confused the Muslims so much that frequently their practices can hardly be regarded as Islamic," he said.

Political Islam, on the other hand, said Dr Mahathir, had become more trenchant with the advent of democracy and had led to further misinterpretations of Islam to justify and support political agendas.

"Thus political Islamists go so far as to declare that anyone who does not support their political parties as infidels, kafir, and will go to hell in the afterlife.

"This frightens a lot of ignorant people into supporting them. Such is the fanatical commitment of the supporters that even obvious misinterpretations by their leaders are accepted by them.

"And so when the leaders of political Islam, the false ulama declare that Allah uses filthy and obscene words, that Allah is a thug, a bully

and a gangster, they readily believe that Allah, the Merciful and the Compassionate, Allah Al-Mutaqabir is a thug, a bully and a gangster," the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir said it was necessary for Muslims to examine critically the teachings of ulama, especially if their interpretations were detrimental towards Muslim brotherhood.

"Differences in Islam is healthy and permitted but surely not to the extent of condemning others as infidels, kafir and to war against each other, forming alliances with non-believers to fight fellow Muslims.

"As we all know, the Prophet brought only one Islam. Now there are so many who declare that they are the only true Muslims and practise their own brand of Islam. The one religion of Allah as taught by the Prophet has become hundreds of religions," he said.

He said that although Muslims suffered much more from terror, only Muslims and Islam were linked to terrorism while terrorists from other faiths were never linked to their religion.

"We must ask ourselves why the Muslims have to endure this humiliation presently, why we have become so weak and incapable of standing up for our rights. What has changed which has made the great Muslim civilisation fall to such a low level? Is it because Islam is a backward religion; is it what Allah has ordained for us, or takdir or is it that we, the Muslims have wrongly understood our religion and not practised it correctly?" Dr Mahathir said Muslims could actually restore the glory and regain the honour of Islam if they were orientated towards having all the skills and knowledge to make the Islamic way of life or Addin admired, respected and held in awe by others.

"The decision is ours to make. If we think we should restore the glory of Islam and the Muslim civilisation; we should free ourselves from oppression, be capable of defending ourselves, then we have to strive to do all the necessary so-called worldly things. If we think we should not do anything worldly, then we should accept the humiliation of Islam, the Muslims and their countries.

"If we think we want to progress and become strong, the ulama can motivate us. Achieving all the things that our detractors have achieved is not difficult. But we need to be pointed in the right direction."

Responding to a question from a foreign participant who enquired whether the conference could result in a dialogue of civilisations as many experts were now talking about clashes of civilisations, Dr Mahathir said it was important for Muslims to have an open view that Islam was no hindrance towards their interaction with non-Muslims.

"At that time, I think when we have a dialogue with the non-Muslims, we will be able to arrive at some positive results. But if you go there in order to just say how great Islam is, it will not do us much," he said.

Dr Mahathir said while skills and knowledge were vital to restore the glory of the Islamic civilisation, Muslims should not become arrogant and forget their religion in their quest to acquire knowledge.

"Instead knowledge should strengthen their beliefs in the religion and Allah. When we study these subjects (like science), we must not forget our religion. We must not become so arrogant and say that we know everything, we can solve everything," Dr Mahathir said.

"The problem with the world today is it is a Godless world, people have forsaken religion," he said, adding that some had however reverted to religion and had become fanatical and misinterpreted their religion.

"It is not only Islam that is being misinterpreted, Christianity is also being misinterpreted by Christian fundamentalists and so do the Jews, they also misinterpreted their religion. Because of all these misinterpretations, we have conflicts that we see today," he said.

Dr Mahathir said there should be a balance between fardu ain and fardu kifayah as without it, Muslims may not have the capacity to defend themselves.