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## Reconstructing Islamic thought

EVER since the Muslim world came under the sway of Western imperialism, Muslim thinkers and reformers have agonised over its decline and what needs to be done to make the ummah strong again. That this was the main theme of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's address on Thursday to a conference of Muslim scholars in Putrajaya is hardly surprising. While many Muslims would agree with Dr Mahathir's diagnosis that the source of decay is the misinterpretation of Islam and the failure to practise it correctly, the orthodox political Islamists have and would always disagree with his prognosis.

Their response has been to blame the West, to see it as the very embodiment of Satan. They postulate the complete rejection of all that is Western and a return to a strict, puritanical Islam in the form of the Syariah (Islamic canon law). This has given rise to the extremist, intolerant, violent, terrorist face of Islam, which has been demonised as the "Green peril" in Western eyes.

Unlike them, Dr Mahathir advocates a moderate, liberal and progressive Islam which is compatible with modernity. It is this interpretation of Islam that has allowed Malaysia to develop as a modern nation without sacrificing Islamic values. This is the model of Islam which has won the admiration of scholars from all over the world attending the conference and which other Muslim countries want to emulate.

Obscurantist interpretations have thickened the fog of ignorance, shackled the mind and spirit, abandoned Muslims to grinding poverty, marginalised them on the periphery of progress and left them as hapless bystanders on the sidelines of world affairs. These have to be rejected in favour of a balanced perspective which frees Muslims from intolerance and prejudice and empowers them to benefit from modernity without eroding their faith and identity.

The wisdom of the Quran is both eternal and human, religious and secular. The Quranic `ilm (knowledge) is comprehensive, encompassing everything created by Allah, including the knowledge of the Creator Himself. Allah invites man to think and to reflect on the universe, on His creations, the stars, the earth, the plants and the animals. It was when theologians began to confine learning only to `ilm aldin (religious knowledge) and reject other spheres of knowledge that the Muslim world began to lose its vitality and dynamism.

As Dr Mahathir pointed out: "For as long as the Muslims are able in accordance with Islamic teachings to balance religious knowledge with worldly knowledge, they would be strong enough to defend themselves and the religion. When they disregard this teaching and concentrate only on religious knowledge they would become weak and unable to defend themselves against their enemies." Unfortunately, some Muslim nations are not helping to deliver the ummah from the state of jahilliah but to enslave it, while they roam the world enjoying themselves on what materialism offers.

If the interpretation of Islam continues to be dominated by conservative scholars who portray themselves as the undisputed arbiters of the Divine Word and defenders of Islam's pristine purity, the Muslim world will continue to ossify and stagnate. The traditional theologians have proven to be ill-equipped in providing original approaches to meet the need for and the challenges of modernity. The reconstruction of Islamic thought in response to the issues of the 21st century, as Dr Mahathir stated, "must

be done by Muslims qualified in the various skills. It would be disastrous if the learned in one field assume they are experts in every field." There must therefore be new forums of Muslim intellectual discourse and new communities of Muslim scholars drawn from all over the world across a multiplicity of disciplines.