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Urgent need to tackle woes of Muslim world

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THE theme at the 10th Session of the Islamic Summit Conference 2003 in Putrajaya, "Knowledge and Morality for the Progress of the Ummah", reflects the urgency in tackling the woes of the Muslim world.

For a long time, the global Muslim community has often been characterised as one that is scientifically and technologically backward.

Because it has been pushed to the fringes of knowledge-related activities, including research and development, it also remained economically and socially oppressed and divided. That largely sums up the sad state of affairs of the Muslim world today. Thus, the emphasis on knowledge and morality was a timely wake-up call which was long overdue.

The Prime Minister has even said there are those who fear knowledge based on science and technology. Some, said Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently, think that science and mathematics are secular subjects and they fear that their Islamic faith will be undermined.

Ironically, it should be the reverse, as the Quran states that knowledge should be pursued and urges humans to think about their creation.

As the Prime Minister said, when people study science, they realise that humans are small beings living in a universe much greater than men could ever imagine. And that there must be a powerful Creator.

In fact, the luminary of science, Albert Einstein, testified to this effect in the book *God in the Equation*.

In short, to the seekers of truth and knowledge, science and religion (Islam in particular), are not on a collision course. Rather, they are complementary.

There are numerous examples that can be cited where science and technology have played a dominant role in Islamic history and beyond.

So dominant was the role that Bertrand Russell wrote in his book *The Impact of Science*: "Science, ever since the time of the Arabs, has had two functions - to enable us to know things; and to enable us to do things.

"The Greeks, with the exception of Archimedes, were only interested in the first of these (based mainly on theoretical argument rather than experimental scientific knowledge which is mainly attributed to the Muslims)."

Adding to this, Briffault in *The Making of Humanity* suggests, "It is highly probable that but for the Arabs, modern industrial civilisation would never have arisen at all."

The contribution is more than just the transmission of what the Greeks produced, but includes new discoveries that are both revolutionary and innovative in nature.

Moreover, as Russell put it in another of his writings, *History of Western Philosophy*, "From India to Spain, the brilliant civilisation of Islam flourished."

At that time, much of Europe was still suffering from intellectual darkness.

The height of Islamic achievements in Spain, better known as AlAndalus or Andalusia, in the 10th century provided some of the best monuments of knowledge in the cities of Cordova, Granada and Toledo.

One report showed that there were more than 400,000 books in the library of Cordova, as compared to 1,800 in the library of Canterbury in Europe, said to be the top Christian library in the 13th century, according to a Catholic source. And there are more of such examples in

Andalusia alone.

So why the scientific slumber in the Muslim world? A question posed to none other than the Muslim Nobel Laureate in chemistry, Ahmed Zewail in a recent interview (New Perspective Quarterly, Spring 2003, Vol 20, No 2).

"It is too simplistic to say that there is a singular cause as to why this is happening just as the Christian world woke up," he said.

Though genetically the people of the world are the same, as being shown from the Human Genome Project, Zewail observed that historically they undergo different experiences leading to the present day disparities.

He cited colonialisation which "by definition installed a class and caste system of the governing elite from or allied with the outside, with all the clubs and prestige, for example, of the British Empire," as one of the main factors.

As such, while there were times when the Arab and Muslim worlds were strong in at least certain areas of knowledge, evident in the days running up to the Renaissance of Europe, that too buckled under the intense pressure of colonialisation.

In turn "it created large populations of frustrated people" who are deprived of the all-important knowledge to self-improve and educate themselves. Or at least it is made difficult for many of them for fear that colonial interests would be jeopardised.

More dangerous is when the Muslim mind too gets "colonised", depriving itself of new thinking that could bring about changes for the better.

One of the outcomes could be what Dr Mahathir, when he officiated at the OIC Expo 2003, insinuated as "unusual interpretations" of the teaching of Islam on science and technology.

In other cases, it could cause the Muslims to withdraw into a cocoon which is hardened by a sterile shell. Consequently it encourages in-breeding and overprotection in stark contrast to the spirit of free enquiry that emerges from the monotheistic revolution of Islam.

According to Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, author of Islam - Creator of the Modern Age, "Scientific way of thinking has its beginnings in Mecca. Then it spread to Medina and Damascus, from there it went on to make Baghdad a great centre of innovative thought."

The bombardment of Baghdad, one of the cradles of civilisation, and of late, robbed of its cultural heritage and richness, is symbolic of what colonialism does to the Islamic world generally.

Notwithstanding all these, as Zewail reiterated, "It goes without saying that the Muslim world cannot just sit there in stagnation and not help itself."

This is where the coming together of the Muslims leaders, scholars, scientists and researchers under the auspices of the Putrajaya Summit could set the stage.

It could serve as the launching pad to lift the Muslim community out of its dire situations only, as the chairman of the Summit bluntly put, "What is needed is the will to do it."

After all, as he said: "It is we who must decide. By earnestly doing so, we might be able to go beyond the usual pathetic sigh of 'Oh, I see' and actually do make the long-awaited things happen."