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The Islamic path to self-awareness

THE speech on the challenges facing Islam by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in London on Monday again provided a timely reminder to all Muslims up against a growing tendency by the world to see the religion in negative light. Although the Prime Minister has said it several times before at home, the remarks made before scholars and experts at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, were of great significance, coming at a time when people are increasingly tempted to generalise unfairly about Muslims.

Dr Mahathir summed up his assessment by asking Muslims to honestly judge whether they are in a good position in the world today. And if they are not, he asked, is it because of Islam, because of its teachings? Or is it because changes have been made to Islam so that it is no longer in accordance with its original teachings?

It is most unfortunate that the negative perception has more to do with political and social than religious factors. Even in Malaysia, the exploits of self-styled ustaz and ulama who use religion for political expediency is well-known, dividing rather than uniting Muslims. And there are Muslim groups who use the religion to pursue political or warlike goals, yet regard themselves not as politicians or warriors but as good Muslims, and indeed act as if they are the only true believers.

One of the greatest challenges facing Muslims is the hundreds of variations of Islam practised today. The problem is compounded when one group decides to impose, sometimes harshly, its beliefs on the rest.

Therefore, Dr Mahathir's advice to Muslims to address the problems of the ummah by going back to the basic teachings of Islam as well as by thinking rationally couldn't have been more apt, coming barely three weeks before he hosts leaders of Muslim countries to a summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Putrajaya.