

Malaysia bridge to understanding

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Q: How serious is the divide between Muslims and the West?

A: The gap is between theory and practice. There is a serious intention to create dialogue but that's at the conceptual level. When it comes to practice on the ground, there are still inherent prejudices and biases.

There is a feeling, whether perceived or real, among Muslims, that they're being targeted, and that they are not getting balanced treatment.

On the other hand, there is this feeling in the West, as if we (Muslims) are aliens. The West says we must accept universal values, the standard practices, as if there is no standard practice, no universal values among Muslims!

Building blocks (of understanding) need to be built. I've attended many, many interfaith and intercultural dialogues organised by Asean and bodies in Europe, and I found that at one point, if you said something not acceptable, there was a strong reaction. Now, at least, we can sit down and discuss. There is less tension. But we still have not found an acceptable model.

Q: Judging by the cases of Muslims under oppression, the stereotypes many still hold about Islam, and some of the thinking that goes into the foreign policies of countries that affect Muslims, are things improving or getting worse?

A: It worries us. For instance, whenever they (some Western nations) tighten laws, in practice, the law is targeted against Muslims, even though the wording may be neutral.

When they say tighten security, the first houses they are going to raid and the suspects they're going to detain are Muslims. It's as if Muslims have become a menace to society.

So when they talk about us having to accept their values, we feel as if they want us to put aside our religion, ethics, values and moral norms, and accept theirs. In practice, there is no acceptance of diversity.

Many Muslims look at this and feel that in the treatment of issues like Palestine, for example, even though it is not a religious issue but a question of human rights and international justice, there is an imbalance.

They see the way Iraq was invaded and reconstructed as the causes of the current conflicts within the country with the Iraqis killing each other.

They see too much interference in Lebanon. On Iran's nuclear issue they see different standards being applied — the rogue states must be Muslim states so, therefore, they cannot be allowed to acquire nuclear technology.

Q: What are the repercussions if

A growing gap between Islam and the West can only be bridged through dialogue and better understanding. It's a role Malaysia is taking up with increasing prominence, says Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar in an interview with ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD ahead of a two-day international conference on 'Islam and the West: Bridging the Gap' in Kuala Lumpur beginning Friday



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the gap is left unchecked?

A: We're going to have future generations (of Muslims) who will become more radicalised.

Even in the language that's being used now — radical Islam, militant Islam — you can see adjectives applied to Islam. They not only punish the people responsible for committing heinous crimes, they punish the religion. This becomes more offensive to the Muslims, the majority of whom are peace-loving.

Q: What does 'a better understanding of Islam by the West' mean?

A: There is a tendency to look at Islam as if it is a religion inconsistent with development, modernity, democracy and the rule of law. There is a tendency to be judgmental. Take Islamophobia. Recent surveys and statistics say that it's on the increase. This worries us.

It's why the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, for example, is pushing the United Nations to draw up an International Convention on Defamation of Religions.

We explain why we take offence if people deny the Holocaust, for example, or say bad things about Judaism and ask why Islam is accorded different treatment. If we talk of rights, then we must balance it with responsibility. Western concepts of these issues do not give fair treatment to others.

Q: What about the role of Muslim communities?

A: We would also have to look at ourselves. Perhaps we have also created some of the misunderstanding. We need to focus on why there is so much misunderstanding, why is it that people don't understand us. We also need to do some soul-searching, *muhasabah*.

Q: What role can Malaysia play in promoting dialogue and narrowing the misunderstanding between Islam and the West?

A: Whenever there are opportunities, we should take them to address the issues. Our prime minister does it all the time. In all his foreign visits, he is invited to present speeches on the subject, in an effort to build bridges of understanding. The more we discuss, the better understanding we can create.

Q: Is it easier for Malaysia, being a moderate, multiracial country with a majority Muslim population, whose government is committed to a policy of Islam Hadhari (civilisational Islam), to take up this role of promoting dialogue?

A: It gives us the necessary credentials and credibility to speak on the subject. We don't just

speak of theories or merely portray and project tolerance and understanding, we practise these values.

Q: Since Sept 11, 2001 there seems to be a greater assertion by some non-Arab Muslim countries, including Malaysia, to project themselves as moderate Muslim countries coming to the fore in trying to bridge this gap.

A: That's because we go back to the original precepts and teachings of Islam. Islam is universal, a religion of peace that is not ethnic-based. Malaysia's credibility is good but the burden is also heavy.

Q: The upcoming conference follows from a similar one held last year in Kuala Lumpur on 'Who Speaks for Islam? Who Speaks for the West?' How did these conferences come about?

A: After 9/11, Muslims and Islam were put under the microscope. Suddenly, there was a lot of discussion about Muslims and Islam, as if both were not part of the global society.

We could see that the trajectory of Islam has been such that it has become a most misunderstood religion, and its followers the victims of this misunderstanding. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi thought Malaysia had the credential to create that bridge of understanding.

We talked to some academics in New York and several UN staff involved in creating intercultural understanding.

The idea then came up: Let us organise a conference on who speaks for Islam and who speaks for the West. That was how the whole concept of this dialogue was initiated.

One thing that last year's conference taught us was that the divide between the Muslim and Western worlds was there and the question of a clash of civilisations remained unresolved.

Many of us would like to deny that a clash exists. There is a denial syndrome.

Q: What do you hope to achieve at the upcoming conference?

A: Our first conference last year was just a start. This second one should see us progressing and perhaps coming up with a more focused, clearer direction on the future. This is a long journey, but it has to begin with the first step, which we've taken confidently because we do have something to offer.

■ The 'Islam and the West: Bridging the Gap' conference is organised by the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations Malaysia, which is under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry

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