

THE OPENING OF THE 4TH INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON THE AL-QURAN
PUSAT ISLAM, KUALA LUMPUR, 2 FEBRUARY 1994

Assalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh Allah be praised for by His grace we are able to gather here for the official opening of the 4th Malaysian International Seminar on the Al-Quran. I consider this seminar important for Malaysia's development to be in line with the teachings of Islam.

2. Islam is a religion based principally on the teachings provided by Al-Quran which contains guidance for every aspect of Muslim life. It is therefore not just a holy book the reading of which will earn us merit. If Islam is to be a way of life then the contents of the Quran must be correctly understood. Islam as a way of life cannot mean the Muslims should have a miserable life and be oppressed by others. Nor should they be dependent on non-Muslims for all their needs.

3. While we must, as Muslims, revere the Quran, we must accept that in order to fully understand it we need to study also the Sunnah and the Hadith. Indeed, we need, in the process of ijtihad, to analyse and interpret the contents. While the Quran is never wrong, it is, however, possible for those who study, analyse and interpret the contents of the Quran to be wrong. It is for this reason that different sects have emerged among the Muslims with different interpretations of the teachings of the Quran, the Hadith and the Sunnah of the Prophet. If one sect rejects the interpretations of another sect it does not mean that it rejects the Quran or Islam. It merely rejects the interpretation of another sect, which may well be wrong. Thus, the Sunnis generally disagree with the teachings and interpretations of the Syiah sects and vice versa.

4. These differences in interpretation are possible because in many instances the Quran gives general guidance which covers every kind of situation. It is up to the learned in religion to make the interpretations. The teachings of the Quran are not just for the time of the Prophet, nor are they confined to the Arabs. All Muslims, everywhere through the ages, can seek and find guidance in the Quran.

5. Unfortunately, there is a tendency among some sects and some ulamas to be rigid in their interpretation and to believe only in their own interpretations. It is such people who cause misunderstandings among Muslims, resulting not only in the division into sects and groups but also in conflicts and wars. Obviously these divisions and conflicts among Muslims are not due to the Quran. They are entirely due to bigotry on the part of the imams and ulamas.

6. Quite often the Quran is interpreted by people with vested interests. These people, in the furtherance of their own objectives very often misinterpret the Quran. Throughout the history of Islam there have been many such people. Indeed immediately following the demise of the Prophet s.a.w. another pretender emerged who deliberately interpreted the teachings of the Prophet wrongly. But for his defeat at the hands of Saidina Abu Bakar, his wrong teachings could very well have spread among the followers of Islam, thus misleading them.

7. Today the Muslims cannot be said to have achieved a gracious and glorious life and civilisation. Everywhere we look we see them oppressed and backward. They are weak and incapable not only of defending themselves but of defending their faith even. Some indeed have become so disillusioned that they have either foresaken Islam or are Muslims in name only.

8. Surely their parlous state cannot be due to their following the teachings of the Quran. If they fail to achieve glory and graciousness in life it cannot be due to Islam or the Quran. But it is entirely possible for their unfortunate situation to be due to the wrong interpretations of the Quran. Indeed it is the only logical explanation for the failures and weaknesses of the faithful today.

9. We know that following upon the spread of Islam among the backward Arabs, they became a great people who mastered all kinds of knowledge and skills which enabled them to go forth and spread the teachings to almost the whole of the known world then. A glorious and powerful ummah emerged which enhanced the influence and power of Islam. Muslims lived a gracious life, honoured and respected by everyone and master of all the skills and knowledge known to men then.

10. All these must have been achieved as a result of their learning the contents of the Quran. A backward people like the Arabs, given to much rivalry and feuding, became a peaceful people with mastery of all the arts and sciences, which in turn brought them universal respect. Such were the results of the teachings contained in the Quran.

11. Why then are the Muslims of today backwards? Why are they weak and oppressed, unable to defend the ummah or their faith? Why are they no longer the masters of themselves? Is it possible that the Quran which moulded the wild Arabs into a world power for centuries after Hijrah is now responsible for the weaknesses and miserable conditions of the ummah? It is not possible. The Quran is the same. Not a word has been changed. There is no such thing as a revised Quran as there are for many other holy books. The Quran of today is the same

as in the times of the Prophet and when it was first written and inspired the faithful.

12. Yet the people of the Quran of today are different from the people of the Quran in the early years of Islam.

13. The only possible reason for the difference in the achievements of the faithful believers lies in the numerous interpretations of the Quran by many different scholars and teachers. The Quran is for all times. It gives guidance for the different ages. It cannot, therefore, be absolutely specific. Thus, the Muslims were exhorted to have horses and swords ready for their defence. Instructions on how to breed and rear horses or forge swords are not given. Obviously Muslims must learn how elsewhere.

14. Equally obvious is that this refers to the early period of Islam when horses and swords were the principal requirements of defence. No mention was made of bows and arrows, camels and foot soldiers, armours of iron and leather. But the fact that these have not been specifically mentioned did not mean that the armies of Islam should not have them. If they were required for defence in that period, then the Muslims must have them. And we know that the Muslim armies had all these defence equipment.

15. By the same token the same verse on preparations for defence by Muslims in this day and age should be interpreted within the context of modern warfare. Swords and horses are of no use. This does not mean that the Quran is out of date or irrelevant. The defence needs now must involve strategies and weapons of modern defence. Only the most dogmatic interpreters of the Quran would insist that we prepare horses and swords. It is these kind of people who make the Quran irrelevant and obstruct the progress of the Muslims to master all the arts, sciences and technologies of modern warfare. That they have not mastered all these is because the teachers of Islam are more interested in esoteric issues which are not critical to the welfare and strength of the Muslim. They would debate endlessly on these issues and they would split up and weaken the Muslims because of them. But they ignore such important verses on defence for example. It is these people who miss the message of the Quran to the detriment of the Muslim ummah.

16. The Quran should not be interpreted literally. To do so would be to limit the vast lesson that are contained in it for the Muslim ummah and for humanity. To do so would make the Quran misleading and out of date. And the Quran is far from being misleading or out of date. It is the interpreters who are misleading, lacking in knowledge and out of date.

17. It is no longer possible to confine the interpretation of the teachings of the Quran to the religious scholars only. The problems of today require that scholars of other disciplines be also involved in the interpretations. The progress in medical science, genetics, space explorations, commerce and industry require deep knowledge in these subjects in order to relate to the teachings of the Quran. If they are not, then there is a grave danger of the Quran being regarded by some Muslims as irrelevant. The non-Muslims might even ridicule it.

18. It is necessary now to go back to the Quran and disregard the interpretations made by some of the ulamas after the period of Islamic glory. There is evidence to show that some of these ulamas were more interested in preserving their influence over the Ottoman Government than they were in making correct interpretation. Thus seeing that the Christian Churches had lost their influence after the separation of the Church from the State, they condemned the learning of non-religious subjects in the hope that those with such knowledge do not emerge to displace them. All such learnings were condemned as secular and proscribed. As a result Muslims who used to lead the world in the arts and the sciences began to lag behind non-Muslims. Eventually almost every Muslim country fell under the rule of Western imperialist. Clearly the interpretations of these ulamas were self-serving. Unfortunately their teachings are still largely accepted today.

19. The only way out is to go back to the Quran and reinterpret it correctly. The interpretations must be in the interest of Islam and the Muslims. They must take into consideration the current situation. They must not be made to serve the interest of those who interpret them or of any individual or group or political factions.

20. This Seminar on the Quran must be motivated by and directed to making the Quran the guiding light of the Muslims. As the Quran served the early Muslims and made them a glorious people, so will it bring back that glory to the modern Muslims. But first we have to interpret its teachings correctly in the context of a world that has changed radically.

21. This seminar is therefore useful if not crucial in order to bring the Quran back to the mainstream of our thinking and our approach to the problems of the Muslims today and in the future. I hope that you will not miss the opportunity to help sustain the faith in the teachings of the Quran.

22. May Allah bless you all and may this seminar be a resounding success.

23. On this note, in the name of Allah, the most Gracious and the most Merciful, I declare this Seminar officially open. Wabillahitaufig walhidayah, wassalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.