

THE OPENING OF THE MALAYSIA-EUROPEAN UNION JOINT SEMINAR
INSTITIUT KEFAHAMAN ISLAM MALAYSIA, KUALA LUMPUR, 24 MARCH
1998

Firstly I would like to thank the organisers, the Institute of Islamic Understanding, Malaysia for inviting me to officially open the Malaysia-European Union Joint Seminar on "Europe and the Islamic World".

2. This is a subject of great importance to Islam and the Muslims for the European perceptions of Islam and its followers will always have repercussions in the Muslim world. The Muslim perception of Europe and the Europeans may result in sporadic and ineffective actions which will not change the course of Europe and its future. But these puny attacks can so shape the perceptions of the Europeans as to result in attitudes and retaliations that can be out of all proportion to the severity of the attacks. Whole countries and peoples are made to suffer for years and years because of the crimes or misdemeanor of a few irresponsible Muslims. In turn the sufferings of these people harden the attitudes of the Muslim world towards the definitive Europeans.

3. For this reason this seminar is timely because it can contribute at least in a small way to an understanding of the problem and may even help bring to light a few ideas and suggestions which can ameliorate the situation.

4. Actually Europe's perception of the Islamic World has not changed very much since Islam first became known to the Europeans and the establishment of the first contact between them and the Muslims. In the first hundred years of Islam the extent of the physical contact reached the maximum level. Byzantium and Spain confronted the Islamic ummah across battlefields in Eastern and Western Europe. The contact was painful for Europe for much territory was lost to Muslim forces. For centuries after that Europeans lived in fear of Muslim attacks and more losses of territory.

5. Despite the contact, and despite the Muslims allowing the European Christians to remain in the conquered territory, European understanding of Islam was minimal. For a very long time they actually refused to believe that Islam was a monotheistic religion like Christianity. They called the Muslims 'Muhammadans' and regard the Muslims as the worshippers of Muhammad along with two other Greek gods.

6. This refusal to recognise Islam as a religion runs parallel with the European attitude towards the Jews and Judaism. The Jews had of course been in contact with the Europeans much longer. They had lived in Spain or Sepharad as they called it before the Visigoths of the Iberian Peninsular converted to Christianity. The Europeans whether as Christians or not, regarded the Jews with hostility.

7. This attitude went on for centuries. The Europeans for a long time actually believed that during the Jewish Passover Christian children were slaughtered and their blood was mixed with the bread eaten by the Jews. Pogroms against the Jewish community occurred regularly. In fact when they embarked on the

First Crusade, Jews were massacred along the way.

8. In Spain the Jews were persecuted and often forced to convert to Christianity. But when they did, they were suspected of not being truly Christians. Along with the Muslims who had been similarly forced to convert during the Spanish reconquest of Spain, they were subjected to public trials during the 300 years of the Spanish Inquisition and often burnt at the stakes.

9. As the Spaniards reconquered Spain, the Jews and the Muslims who refused to convert had to flee the country. While the Muslims fled to North Africa those of the Jews who did not follow them, migrated to Portugal and to other countries in Europe. Their reception by the other Europeans varied. Holland and later Britain gave refuge to the Jews and allowed them to practise their own religion. Elsewhere the persecution continued culminating in the biggest pogrom of all in Nazi Germany.

10. After that bloodbath the Europeans awoke to the injustices that they had inflicted upon the Jews for almost two millennium. And so whereas the fate of the two non-Christian people at Europeans' hands was identical for many centuries, there is now a big difference between the fates of the Jews and the Muslims at the hands of Europeans today.

11. Europeans now accept Jews as their equals and as Europeans with all the political and religious rights of Europeans. They are not only full citizens but very many of them hold high office and are allowed to determine the affairs of Europe and the Europeans without having to convert. Even dual nationality is permitted the European Jews now, surely a radical departure from past practices.

12. The Muslims on the other hand have not made any headway. If at all their relation with the Europeans has become worse than ever before. After the end of the Cold War, confrontation between Europe and the rest of the world seemed to be confined to Muslims and Muslim countries. There is wide spread talks about a clash of civilisation, meaning a clash between European civilisation and the Muslim civilisation. Is there no way for the European perception of Islam and the Muslims to be changed the way their perception of the Jews have been changed? What is there that the Muslims have to do or for that matter what can Europeans do to change their relations with the Muslim World?

13. Throughout the history of European relationship with Islam and the Muslims, although generally understanding and appreciation was negative, there have been among European Christian notables who had tried to learn about Islam and to change the attitudes of the Christians. Among them were Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny who initiated the first Latin translation of the Quran, Muslim legends, history and an explanation of Islamic teachings.

14. St Francis of Assisi in 1218 C.E. crossed the battle lines in order to meet Sultan al-Kamil. His mission however was to urge the Sultan to accept Christianity. But because he did not condemn Islam or Prophet Muhammad, the Sultan treated St. Francis with courtesy although he rejected conversion to

Christianity.

15. During the Renaissance, Europeans tried to acquire a better understanding of Islam. After the Turkish defeat of Byzantium, John of Segovia pointed to the need to cope with Islam and the Muslims in other ways besides war and conversion. He initiated a new translation of the Quran, working together with Muslim jurists from Spain. He also proposed an international conference to exchange views between Muslims and Christians.

16. Also during the Renaissance, Arabic studies were begun in many institutions which led to a more realistic view of the Muslims and Islam. Barthelmy d' Herbelot published the Bibliotheque Oriental which was regarded as the Encyclopedia of Islam. It gave a less biased view than was current at that time.

17. Unfortunately these attempts to change the European perception of Islam and the Muslims did not have any real results. Islam for the Europeans remained the belief of the enemy, the anti-Christian and the non-Europeans. Thus Lord Cromer the British Governor of occupied Egypt felt only contempt for the efforts of the reformer Mohamad Abduh (1905) to rethink some of the traditional Islamic ideas. Islam he said, could not reform itself.

18. The memory of the Crusade was always fresh, so that when the French captured Turkish-held Damascus after being helped by Muslim Arab rebels, the French commander went to the tomb of Salah-el-Din or Saladin and cried "We have returned, Saladin".

19. Every now and then European writers and leaders emerged who tried to change the European views of Islam and the Muslims. But like their predecessors during the Renaissance they all failed.

20. When an idea or a perception has taken root and becomes an article of faith it is very difficult to change. It does not matter that the idea is obviously wrong. It does not matter that it is manifestly harmful. Dislodging it will always be opposed and countered by people who have accepted the idea and who distrust change.

21. It took the Europeans nearly 2000 years to dismiss the idea of the Jewish conspiracy. It took the Russians a hundred years to realise and admit that Communism not only did not work but was also harmful. In the interim millions were killed and millions more suffered horribly while the proponents continued to uphold their faith in the ideology. Today we are seeing faith in new economic and political theories which may not be challenged despite the obvious harm that they do to many societies.

22. But if the Europeans can learn to accept the Jews and Judaism, is it not possible for the Europeans to tolerate Islam and the Muslims? Do we need a holocaust to trigger this change? Isn' t the massacre of 200,000 Bosnian Muslims not enough?

23. But the Muslims have to look at themselves also, their contribution to the European distrust and dislike of Islam and Muslims. They are not blameless.

24. During the period of Muslim rule of Spain, the Christians as well as the Jews were allowed to stay and to practise their own religions. Their relationship was not completely harmonious but certainly many Christians and Jews served in the service of Muslim Governments and the Caliphs personally. Some Jews rose to very high ranks and wielded a lot of power. But the Muslims distrusted those Christians who converted to Islam. They were treated as second class Muslims even though they spoke Arabic and were well-versed in Arabic literature as well as Islam. Many therefore remained crypto-Christians who reverted to Christianity as soon as the Spanish reconquest put them once again under Christian kings. Had the Muslims accepted the Spanish converts as genuine practising Muslims these people could have remained Muslims and spearheaded a move for greater understanding and tolerance of Islam and the Muslims in Europe. Of course they could also have been expelled with the rest. But in Yugoslavia, Albania and many Eastern European countries they were allowed to remain. Sadly as we are seeing European animosity against them remain unabated.

25. Generally there was no real awareness about Europe and the Europeans among the Muslims until 200 years ago. For a long time the Europeans were not a threat and could not do much harm to the Muslims. The impact of the Crusade was minimal. Even today Muslims did not consider the Crusades as the cause of their antagonism towards the Europeans, even though much atrocities were committed by the Crusaders when they conquered Muslim territories.

26. But 200 years ago the Europeans began to conquer and colonise Muslim lands in Africa and elsewhere. The Spaniards and then the French carried their war against the Muslims into non-European Muslim land. Remembering their days of glory when they ruled Spain and even made forays into France, the Muslims began to foster a perception of Europeans as their enemy. Although there was nothing religious about European hegemony the Muslims nevertheless invoked religion in order to galvanise their people against the Franks, the European Christians.

27. The Turkish conquest of Eastern Europe was not the result of any desire to spread the Islamic faith. The wars were not holy wars but the battles were cruel and both sides were guilty of dreadful atrocities. But this was the way wars were fought in those days. The important thing is that once the conquest was over the Christians were allowed to continue living in the conquered territories. They may have been discriminated against as was normal for conquerors over the conquered but they were not hated because they were Europeans and Christians.

28. But when the Turks were driven back, their attitude towards the Europeans changed. This was especially so when later on the British and the French actively supported Arab rebellions against the Turks. But as we all know, later on the Turks became disillusioned with Islam and blamed it for their humiliation. Muslims though they are, their attitude towards the Europeans differ generally from those of other Muslims, although they do take the side of the Bosnian Muslims when those people were massacred by the Serbs in the course of their

ethnic cleansing, in what is the only real European religious war in modern times.

29. Believing that the Europeans were helping them to gain independence the Arabs within the Turkish Muslim Empire fought alongside the French and the British against the Turks. But the defeat of the Turks did not result in independence for the Arabs. Their land was divided up between the British and the French and the countries created became de facto colonies of these European powers. Thus was the opportunity to cement friendship between Europe and the Muslim world missed. The disillusionment of the Arabs left them embittered against the Europeans.

30. Had the Europeans honoured their promise and given the Arabs their independence, relation with Europe today would have been very different. As it is, when finally the Arab countries gained their independence, they distrusted the Europeans and could not bring themselves to regard the Western Europeans as friends. There is no religious basis for their attitude. It is purely political.

31. As a result the Arab countries aligned themselves with the Communist bloc during the Cold War. This is really contrary to their religious creed. As Muslims and believers in the same God as the Christians they should really be well-disposed towards the Western Europeans. But such was their distrust and dislike of the Western Europeans that they were prepared to be closely associated with the atheistic Communists and Communism. Many Arab Muslims actually accepted the Communist ideology or at least their version of it.

32. Then came the Palestinian issue. This is really the straw that broke the camel's back. The Arabs fought together with the British to wrest Palestine from the Turks. But in the end the land they liberated together was partitioned and given to the Jews.

33. With every failure of Arab attempts to recover what they consider is their land their bitterness increased. Their armies defeated they resorted to unorthodox war, to guerilla war and finally to terror attacks against their detractors including the Europeans.

34. Again it must be pointed out that the basis for the anti-European feelings of the Arabs in particular and the Muslims in general is political. But quite naturally religion is invoked. Ancient feuds and the historic quarrels as related in the Quran between Jews and Muslims are resurrected. Since the Europeans invariably support the Jewish State, the perception of the Muslims about European enmity towards them remain. Even when they gave up terror attacks and chose the negotiating table to settle their problems their distrust of the Europeans continued.

35. There is of course a need for both the Europeans and the Muslims to improve their perceptions of each other in order to improve their relations. If the Europeans can banish their much more deep -- rooted antagonism towards the Jews, the alleged betrayers of Jesus Christ, there is no reason why they cannot lessen their antagonism towards the Muslims, to change their view and their

attitude towards the Muslim world.

36. We do not need a saint to bring about a better understanding about each other. All that we need is fair and accurate information about Islam and the Muslims on the one hand and about the true concern and generosity of the Europeans on the other. This is actually more important than an understanding of each other' s religion.

37. For example the activities of the French doctors who risk their lives to attend to the medical needs of people in Muslim countries who had been displaced by wars have not received the right publicity among Muslims. Similarly the fact that most Muslims did not support the death sentence passed on Salman Rushdie has also not been publicised among the Europeans.

38. Mostly the reports about the Muslims are sensational and calculated to create the impression that Muslims are all terrorists, they ill-treat their womenfolk, they are fanatics and are so-called fundamentalists. No attempt is made to explain that fundamentalists and extremists are found among people of all religious persuasions. The Hindus, the Sikhs, the Christians and even the Buddhists have produced their share of extremists and fundamentalists. Their deeds are every bit as cruel and irrational as the Muslim terrorists, indeed often more than them. The kind of ethnic cleansing invented and practised by the Serbs has never been perpetrated by the Muslims, not in recent times certainly.

39. It is also useful for the Europeans to know the debt owed the Muslims by European civilisation. When the Muslims conquered Spain, it was during the Dark Ages when the Europeans were very backward and superstitious. Education was limited to select members of the clergy who were jealous of the knowledge they had. Science was a taboo subject, as was medicine, mathematics and the philosophical and other works of the ancient Greeks.

40. It was the Muslims who resurrected the learnings of the Greeks, and expanded on them. The Muslims added new subjects and produced numerous books and papers. They built great libraries in Spain and in Baghdad and did not object to Europeans studying the treasury of knowledge they had amassed. Even as the Crusaders were attacking the Muslims in the Middle East, others were sitting at the feet of Muslim scholars in Spain. Thus was the ancient wisdom brought back to Europe. And thus was the European Renaissance begun.

41. It is unfortunate that having studied, documented and passed on their learnings to the Europeans, the Muslims themselves began to reject such knowledge as unIslamic. And so even as they helped bring light to end the Dark Ages of Europe, the Muslims themselves were sliding into their decline. And that decline has continued despite several attempts by Muslim Reformers.

42. That the Muslims literally fueled the rise of European civilisation is something Europeans are loath to admit. They even forget that such scholars as Avicena, Averroes and others were Muslims. No attempt is made to explain that the real

names of these two are Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushdi.

43. It is time that the contribution of the Muslims to science and the subsequent progress of Europe is acknowledged by both Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe and elsewhere. As much as the Muslims want the Christians to believe that Mohamad is a prophet of a monotheistic religion, the Muslims must not try to deny or to ignore that the Quran clearly acknowledges the link between Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the prophets of the three religions are the same, as is the one God that they worship. Having acknowledged this we can then differ over each other's versions of the three religions. Until there is this admission of what the Quran says about the three religions, Muslims cannot develop a more rational and friendlier view of the Europeans.

44. Is there merit in changing the European perception of the Muslim World? There is of course, because otherwise much will be wasted in useless confrontation. So many lives and so much wealth have already been lost for so very little gains. Practically all the Muslim land conquered by the Europeans have been regained by the Muslims. And all the European land have been retaken by the Europeans. The net result is really a draw. But because of the continued misunderstanding neither the Europeans nor the Muslims can feel comfortable with each other.

45. Muslims living in European countries are often subjected to attacks. European tourists in Muslim lands are similarly attacked. Of course the attacks on Muslims in Bosnia need no elaboration. These are not Turks or Arabs. They are Europeans. But because they are Muslims they have been subjected to the worse kind of bestial attacks seen in modern times.

46. Many Muslim countries are now under siege by Europeans. Their people starved and deprived of medicine and the necessities of life. It may not have been a conspiracy against Muslim and Muslim countries but the fact is that the victims are Muslims and the perpetrators are European or of European antecedents.

47. We talk a lot about human rights, about justice and fairplay, about democracy and freedom. But the fact is that for long periods of time in the past and even presently the Muslims have experienced no freedom from European hegemony. Today Muslim countries and their peoples have actually lost their independence i.e. their freedom, through the sanctions applied against them and now through financial pressures brought to bear upon them. They cannot fail to note that these sanctions and pressures have enriched the Europeans and made them more powerful.

48. In Malaysia, Muslims have been living and working with non-Muslims quite harmoniously. Admittedly there have been instances when they did not. But that is the point. It is possible for people who perceived each other as enemies to overcome their feelings because they realise that they can get a better deal by overcoming their feelings. Historically the coming of Islam to the Jahiliah Arabs did exactly just that -- it banished the eternal feuds between the tribes and united

them and brought peace and greatness to them.

49. By religious teachings and by culture Muslims are eminently amenable to reconciliation. If the Europeans can change the views of Islam and the Muslims, it is possible for reconciliation to be effected and a completely new relationship established between Muslims and the Europeans, a relationship that will solve most of the conflict that we see today and will certainly prevent any clash of civilisations in the future.

50. The experience that Malaysia has in leading a violent-free Muslim majority country would perhaps qualify us to provide the example of a truly Islamic modus vivendi in inter-religious and inter-civilisational accord. In doing so, we are constantly guided by verse 48 of Chapter 5 (or Surah Al-Maidah) of the Holy Quran, which is translated thus:-

"To thee (O Muhammad) We sent the scripture in truth, confirming the scriptures that came before it, and guarding it in safety. So judge between them (i.e the peoples of differing faiths) by what God had revealed, and follow not their vain _
</antartica/documents/get-document?docid=8684>desires, diverging from the truth that has come to thee. To each among you, We have prescribed a set of rules of practical conduct and a spiritual way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single community, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you; so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is God. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute".

51. It is never too late to change. Even as the European perceptions of the Jews have changed, it is not impossible for European perceptions of the Muslims to change. And Muslim perceptions of the Europeans should change also.

52. I now have pleasure in declaring open the Malaysia- European Union Joint Seminar.