

The International Conference Of Religious Studies:

" Meeting The Millennium "

Palace Of The Golden Horses, Kuala Lumpur 30 December 1999

I would like to congratulate the organisers of this International Conference of Religious Studies for their initiative in organising this meeting on 'Religion in the 21st Century - A Civilisational Prospective'.

2. Although the focus is mainly on the religious beliefs of the Chinese, beliefs which are based on Buddhism, Taoism and the teachings of various Chinese philosophers such as Confucius, you have also included a paper on 'The Wisdom of the Al-Quran in modern time'. I think it is important that in such a discussion on the role of religion, Islam should also be given a hearing.
3. I say this because Islam is the most misunderstood religion today. It is misunderstood not only by non-Muslims but by Muslims themselves. Such is the misunderstanding of Muslims about their religion that they have erected a tall barrier against access to it and to the Muslims themselves by non-Muslims. They seem to have forgotten that most Muslims had ancestors who were not Muslims but who were converted to Islam because they came into contact with Muslims. Had the Muslims of the past rejected contact with non-Muslims then the ancestors of the present day Muslim would not have learnt about Islam and would not have converted to Islam. If they had not then the present day Muslim might have been born non-Muslim and would not be Muslims.
4. There are of course other manifestations of a lack of understanding of Islam among Muslims. A glaring example is the rejection of the Islamic concept and belief that all Muslims are brothers. The followers of various Muslim sects invariably regard the followers of other sects as being un-Islamic or not Muslim enough and are therefore not to be treated as brothers. Today with the emergence of political parties, the practising Muslim members of certain political parties are condemned as not being truly Muslim and are treated worse than non-Muslims by members of the opposing political parties.
5. Muslim nations are often at war with one another, a state of affairs that cannot be considered as brotherly.
6. If Muslims truly understand Islam then they would regard each other as brothers even if they have political, national or racial differences between them. We know of instances where practising Muslims refuse to pray together with other Muslims because of political differences.
7. Despite the repeated injunction that Muslims must seek well-being in this life as much as in the hereafter, many Muslims believe that a Muslim should only seek merit for the next world. Consequently he neglects his well-being in this world and this results in Muslims becoming poor and unable to help themselves and to prevent themselves from being oppressed by others. The tragedies of Bosnia, Kosovo and many West Asian and Central Asian Muslim countries are

due to this.

8. The Muslims' failure to understand his own religion is nothing compared to the failure of the non- Muslims, in particular the ethnic Europeans, to understand the Muslims and their religion. There is a historical basis for this. The long period of Muslim dominance and occupation of substantial parts of Europe has permanently affected the European psyche. The Crusade against the Muslims, the struggle to liberate Europe and the Holy land from the Muslims seems unending. Initially it was Christianity which the Europeans wanted to defend and save. But now it is just the memory of an inglorious past, of Muslim overlordship which influence the thinking and attitude of the Europeans towards Islam and the Muslims.

9. The Muslim countries and peoples of today are so weak that there can never be a repeat of the Muslim conquest of Europe. But the fear is still nascent. Responding to this fear the Europeans tend to distrust and suppress Muslims everywhere. They do this quite unconsciously, sometimes speaking to Muslims about the need to suppress other Muslims without thinking that their listeners might not be sympathetic to their views.

10. The Turkish empire occupied most of Eastern Europe for centuries. It came near to capturing Vienna, a feat which would have opened the flood-gates to Islam in Europe itself. As we can see now in the former Yugoslavia, ethnic Europeans did convert to Islam and have remained faithful to the religion despite decades of atheistic Communist rule. It is not unthinkable that had the Muslims conquered Central Europe, Islam could today be the faith of many Europeans. To Christian Europeans, whether nominal or practising, this would have been a tragedy of horrendous proportions.

11. The fall of the Turkish Empire was engineered by the Europeans, principally the French and the British. They stirred up nationalist sentiments among the Arab subjects of the Turks and helped them to throw off the Turkish yoke. But the Arabs soon found that it was not independence that they gained. All the Arab land freed from the Turks were colonised by the British and the French. The Arabs realised too late that they had exchanged Muslim overlords for Christian European overlords.

12. As much as the Europeans remember the Muslim conquest of their land, the Arab Muslims remember how they had been cheated into overthrowing Turkish Muslim rule for European Christian rule. Whereas Muslims in the past could live side by side with Christians, now they identify Christianity with the Europeans and they develop an aversion to the religion. That a significant number of Arabs are Christians and are also anti-European have not mitigated their animosity towards the Christian Europeans.

13. For years after the fall of the Turkish Empire the Arabs in West Asia and Northern Africa struggled mightily to liberate themselves from European colonialism. They fought conventional as well as guerilla wars against their colonial oppressors and inflicted large numbers of casualties.

14. The bitterness against the Europeans built up to uncontrollable rage as they fought. Finally they won their independence. But the single Muslim empire had been carved up into numerous nation states which were and still are very weak. There is no replacement for the Turkish nation which was a European power and had protected the Muslims. Rivalry between the Arab states also ensured that none can ever become strong.

15. The animosity of the Arab Muslims towards the European could have abated with their attainment of independence. Unfortunately the European powers left a festering sore which cannot be healed. While allowing the Arabs to regain their territories, the Europeans decided to make Palestine the homeland of the Jews; a project which would rid Europe of its Jewish problem.

16. At the time when Palestine was made a Jewish state, there was only a small number of Jews living in peace with a huge majority of Arabs. Naturally the Arabs regarded the creation of Israel as an act of expropriating their land by the Europeans in order to appease the Jews and solve their Jewish problem. With this the seeds of future Arab violence against all that represent the Europeans were sown.

17. Conventional wars can be fought between sovereign nations no matter their relative sizes. But conventional wars failed as Arab nations tried to dislodge the Israelis. The only way for the Arabs to fight against what they perceive as gross injustice was to resort to guerilla warfare.

18. Throughout the ages the Europeans have demonstrated innovativeness in warfare. Terrorist methods which involve putting innocent people at risk and killing them are largely European inventions. Some of these terroristic acts are state initiated.

19. In the 60' s and early 70' s terrorists gangs abound in Europe. The Baader-Meinhof gang is one of them. It was the Europeans who carried out the first hijacking of a commercial plane. In Northern Ireland bombs were exploded in the cities, killing men, women and children.

20. The Arabs soon learnt the methods of terrorism as they seek to regain Palestine. They hijacked planes, they bombed buildings and they rampaged with blazing guns against everyone, their own people largely but also against the hated Europeans.

21. There is no doubt that their methods are those of terrorists. But whereas others were called just terrorists, the Arabs were labelled Muslim terrorists. It is known that a few of the Arab terrorists were Christians but the label Muslim terrorists is still stuck to them.

22. This labelling is a manifestation of the lack of understanding of Islam. Difficult though it is to believe, Islam is actually a religion of peace. The word "Islam" itself has its root in the Arab word for peace.

23. Long before Islam came to the Arabs they were divided into many feuding

tribes who fought each other incessantly. Peace was something that all of them yearned for but never seem to get. Just as in famine prone China the usual form of greeting is "Have you eaten", among the warring tribes of Arabia this yearning for peace is expressed by wishing "Peace be on You" when they meet. Incidentally the Jews who also belong to West Asia greet people with the salutation "Shalom" which has the same connotation as "salaam" or peace.

24. It is natural therefore for Islam to emphasise peace, to unite the warring Arab tribes, to unite the Muslims so they will all live in peace. Islam emphatically rejects war as a solution to conflicts between people. Muslims may only fight if they are attacked by others.

25. But Western historians invariably attributed the spread of Islam to the sword. If we look into the history of Christianity we would find many incidences of violence, torture and burnings at the stake as means to spread the gospel. Muslim historians have never spoken of these instances of violence as being a common feature in the spread of Christianity.

26. Clearly the Europeans tend to forget or ignore their own propensity for violence when they glibly talk of "Muslim Terrorists". They ignore the fact that more Muslims are killed by non-Muslims as in Bosnia Herzegovina than non-Muslims being killed by Muslim terrorists. They never ever talk of Christian terrorists or Buddhist terrorists or Hindu terrorists. But they never miss to link the religion of the terrorist if he happens to be Muslim. Such is the extent of their misunderstanding.

27. The Malays of Malaysia are all Muslims. The history of Malaya and Malaysia is clearly one of peaceful coexistence between the Malay Muslims and the non-Malay followers of numerous religions. Even the 1969 racial clashes were not religious in character. They were racial. Since then the Malay Muslims have lived in harmony with the non-Malay non-Islamic people.

28. Although Malaysia is governed by predominantly Malay Muslim Governments there has been no attempt to oppress the non-Muslims. The Government of Malaysia is very tolerant and show respect for the religious observances of the different religious groups. No one can say that by being so it is not Islamic.

29. Lately we are seeing some aberrations but these are the exceptions which actually proves the rule. A country with a Muslim majority in power can ensure fairness and justice for everyone irrespective of religion or race.

30. Religion is still very relevant in the Malaysian multi-religious society. To ignore it or to side-line it would be unwise. A totally secular society cannot be created in Malaysia. The religions of the people must play their role.

31. Islam has been accepted as the official religion of this country but other religions are free to be practised in Malaysia. In other countries where the official religion is also the religion of almost every citizen, the freedom to practice other religions is not of great consequence. But in Malaysia where Islam is the religion of only 60 percent of the people, not only is freedom to practice other religions

very meaningful and important but it implies an acceptance of tolerance and accommodation on the part of the majority Muslims.

32. This is where the understanding of the official religion is very necessary. If the official religion is mysterious and its practice is hidden then there is bound to be suspicions and fear. There would be fear that the teachings of the official religion would be imposed on the followers of other religions. There would be fear that obstacles would be put in the way of other religions. There would be fear of forced conversions etc.

33. It is imperative therefore that the Muslims in this country practise their religion not in seclusion but in full view of all the peoples of this country irrespective of their faiths. While non-Muslims should not be required to participate in any religious rituals, they should not be denied their presence when such rituals are carried.

34. We are fortunate that in this country the recitation of the "doa" or Muslim prayers before any event is accepted by everyone. Each can pray according to his own faith as the Muslim prayers are recited.

35. Another phenomenon that we see in this country is the joint celebration of religious festivals. Open- houses during religious festivals have brought the peoples of different faiths together and without doubt this has brought about greater understanding if not of each other' s religions, at least of each other' s culture.

36. Even more interesting is the breaking of the fast during Ramadan. Hotels and restaurants prepare food for the Muslims to break their fasts, but non-Muslims join in, respectfully refraining from having their buffet meals until their Muslim brothers break their fasts.

37. The diversity of religious practices which in other countries have resulted in violent clashes, have, in Malaysia, resulted in bringing the followers of different religions together. Malaysia' s remarkable unity in diversity is the result of the openness in the practice of the different religions and in particular the religion of the majority, the official religion of Islam.

38. I believe that religions will still have a role in the 21st century. We are seeing now a swing towards total materialism in the West, where wealth alone is expected to bring about happiness and a better quality of life. But we have only recently experienced how the quest for unlimited wealth by the avaricious can destroy the tranquility of life in our country. Without a religious anchor we would have despaired. But we did not because we could fall back upon our spiritual values. Calmed by our spiritual beliefs we were able to face the material problems of our life, to understand them and to overcome them. Without spiritual beliefs it is doubtful that we can overcome the challenges without becoming unbalanced.

39. I believe that you are holding this conference at the right time. Many societies have discarded spiritual values and they often become unbalanced and feel lost

when faced with the vicissitudes of life.

40. Religion according to Karl Marx is the opium of life. But religions have survived and will continue to survive long after Marx and his ideology is relegated to the history books. Clearly ideologies invented by man cannot replace religions.

41. It is appropriate that you should choose to discuss religion in the 21st Century at this conference.

42. I wish you a very successful meeting.