

The Opening Of World Ulama Conference

Marriot Hotel, Putrajaya 10 July 2003

"Islam in Era of Globalisation"

Alhamdulillah, All Praise be for Allah, by whose grace and blessings we are gathered here today to discuss matters regarding our religion, Islam and the ummah. I would like to thank the organisers for giving me this opportunity to officiate this conference and to speak on a matter that is close to our hearts.

2. But before that I would like to welcome all participants and guests, especially those from outside Malaysia to this country, this multi-racial and multi-religious country where everyone accepts the constitution which provides that Islam is the official religion but the practice of other religions by their followers are guaranteed. We believe in religious harmony as advocated by Islam in Surah Al-Kafirun, ayat five and six. "Nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you your Way, and to me mine."

3. Islam does not have a system of hierarchical priests but the Muslim scholars, the learned ones or the ulamas as they are generally referred to, play an extremely important role in the life of Muslim individuals and the Muslim community. Such is their influence that the stability and progress of Muslim countries depend much on them.

4. The ulamas are said to be the successors or the "warasah" of the Prophet. This makes them even more powerful. Their words are often taken as the religious truth and seldom does anyone dispute any pronouncement made by them.

5. The great ulamas of history were truly learned people with only an interest in seeing that Islam was interpreted correctly. However even these great ulamas differ in their interpretations of Islam. This has resulted in schisms among the Muslims, so deep that many sects cannot be reconciled to this day.

6. Thus we have the division between the Sunnis and the Shiahs. Their differences have lead to frequent wars between them. But the Sunnis and the Shiahs are again divided by the different teachings of their imams, who were of course great scholars or ulamas. Then there are the different schools or "mazhabs" of Islam which have resulted in further subdivisions into Tarikats, with peculiar beliefs including the practice of going into a trance as part of their religious rituals. All

these groups and beliefs emerge because different ulamas interpret and teach the religion differently.

7. Today the term ulama is used very loosely. Just about anyone can claim to be an ulama, a successor of the Prophet, entitled to make any interpretation or pronouncement on Islam. They always have some followers who can be quite fanatical. And Muslims become even more fragmented.

8. Political Islam emerged almost immediately after the death of the Prophet. The Khawarij and the Bani Umayyah formed distinct groups with their own interpretations of Islam. And they warred with each other. Since then, various manifestations of political Islam have gained followings in most Muslim countries.

9. Political Islam is about using Islam for political ends. With the advent of democracy political Islam has become more trenchant. Very frequently political Islam leads to deliberate misinterpretations of Islam to justify and support their political agendas.

10. Thus political Islamists go so far as to declare that anyone who does not support their political parties as infidels, kafir, and will go to hell in the afterlife. This frightens a lot of ignorant people into supporting them. Such is the fanatical commitment of the supporters that even obvious misinterpretations by their leaders are accepted by them. And so when the leaders of political Islam, the false ulamas declare that Allah uses filthy and obscene words, that Allah is a thug, a bully and a gangster, they readily believe that Allah, the Merciful and the Compassionate, Allah Al-Mutaqabir is a thug, a bully and a gangster. Yet others interpret Al-Mutaqabir differently, as Allah the Great, the possessor of greatness. The language of the bazaar cannot be applied to Allahu Akhbar.

11. Every now and again a charismatic ulama would emerge and declare himself as the Imam Mahadi, come to save the ummah. Invariably they have proven to be false and their leadership did not save the ummah. Instead the ummah were often defeated and sink further into weakness and backwardness. Still there are many even in Malaysia who claim that they are the chosen of Allah. And their followers fanatically support them.

12. While the ulamas are important in order to guide the Muslims along the correct paths as taught by Islam, it is clearly important that we do not accept everyone who claims to be an ulama as genuine. Many self-declared ulamas are pretenders with their own self-interest on their agenda. These pretenders have confused the Muslims so much that

frequently their practices can hardly be regarded as Islamic. And many Muslim splinter groups were formed because of these false ulamas.

13. It is therefore necessary that we examine critically the teachings of the ulamas, whether from the past or the present. Unity and brotherhood is enjoined by Islam, but the different teachings and interpretations prevent unity and many Muslims reject the brotherhood of Muslims unless they belong to their own groups or sects or even to their own political parties. Differences in Islam is healthy and permitted but surely not to the extent of condemning others as infidels, kafir and to war against each other, forming alliances with non-believers to fight fellow Muslims. As we all know the Prophet s.a.w. brought only one Islam. Now there are so many who declare that they are the only true Muslims and practice their own brand of Islam. The one religion of Allah as taught by the Prophet has become hundreds of religions.

14. Consequently Muslims today are so very confused and divided that they are unable to handle the great changes that have taken place in the world during the 1,400 years after the Prophet taught Islam to the Jahilliah. Some apparently believe that only by recreating the way of life 1,400 years ago can they become true Muslims. For them Islam is only for the time of the Prophet and the people of Arabia and not for all ages and situations.

15. We know that when the Jahilliah accepted Islam they became enlightened people, were able to stop the feuds and fighting between their tribes and were able to build a great Islamic civilisation. They acquired knowledge and skills and dominated the known world of their times. They widened their territories and acquired knowledge and skills in every field of human endeavour and became truly Allah's Khalifah on earth. Islam and the Muslims were respected by all humanity.

16. The great Muslim civilisation that the Jahilliah and other convert to Islam initiated, resulted in reforms even in the non-Muslim world. It is a fact that mathematics, the sciences, medicine, astronomy and many other fields of learning made tremendous progress due to the work of the Muslim scholars. This is of course completely in keeping with the teachings of Islam, where the first injunction to the Prophet was to "Read", "Iqraq". To read means to study, to acquire knowledge. During the golden years of the Islamic civilisation, the world looked up to the Muslims for knowledge in all fields. The Europeans and the Jews studied Arabic in order to gain access to the earlier works of the Greeks, the Persians, the Indians and the Chinese which had been translated into Arabic and studied as well as expanded by Muslim Arab scholars.

17. The Muslims also became great traders, skillfully sailing across vast oceans using their knowledge of astronomy. Their trade with far away places also resulted in the spread of Islam in the countries they traded with. They were not professional missionaries but their worldly success and exemplary behavior impressed the local rulers, who then accepted Islam. Indonesia is today the most populous Muslim nation because of the Muslim traders from Yemen and India.

18. The spread in the teachings of Islam together with the successes of the Muslims in the administration of their territories as well as their skills and success in trade and industry, gained for the Muslims respect and awe in the world. They were regarded as a world power. No one dared to oppress the Muslims or to invade their territories.

19. But we all know that now far from being a world power we, the one billion over Muslims, are easily oppressed by the non-Muslims, easily defeated in war and are forced to accept foreign rule and foreign hegemony. The Prophet has been called a terrorist and insulted openly. Muslim holy places have been desecrated. Muslim countries, divided and weak, have to pay homage to the powerful non-Muslim nations. Today Muslims can be arrested and detained or may even be executed for alleged terrorism. Although Muslims suffer much more from terror, only Muslims and Islam are linked to terrorism. The religions of non-Muslims who commit acts of terror are not mentioned. We do not hear of Christian terrorists, or Hindu terrorists or Buddhist terrorists or Jewish terrorists although there are as many of them as there are Muslim terrorists. We only hear of Muslim terrorists.

20. We must ask ourselves why the Muslims have to endure this humiliation presently; why we have become so weak and incapable of standing up for our rights. What has changed which has made the great Muslim civilisation fall to such a low level? Is it because Islam is a backward religion; is it what Allah has ordained for us, or takdir or is it that we, the Muslims have wrongly understood our religion and not practised it correctly?

21. Firstly, is it because of the backwardness of Islam that we cannot now compete with the non-Muslims and defend ourselves? It simply cannot be. We know that when the Jahilliah accepted Islam, their ignorance was replaced by enlightenment and knowledge and they became capable of building a great worldly civilisation which encompassed almost the whole of the known world then. This great civilisation lasted for almost 1,300 years. If Islam is the cause of the backwardness of Muslims, there would never have been a strong and advanced Muslim civilisation.

22. If it is not the religion of Islam which has caused the fall of the Muslims, then is it because Allah has ordained that Muslims be backward and oppressed by others? Again it cannot be, for Allah had raised the ignorant Arabs and others who embraced Islam in the early years so that they became perfect Khalifahs on earth and brought glory to Islam, the religion of Allah. He cannot deliberately ordain that Islam be humiliated and the Muslims oppressed for no reason.

23. The only conclusion that we can make for the sad fate of the Muslims is that they are not practising the true teachings of Islam, that the Islam that they now practise is wrongly interpreted.

24. We know that in 1492 the last Muslim kingdom in Spain was defeated and the Muslims were expelled from Spain. Why did this happen? If we look at the history of Al-Andalus as the Muslims called Spain, we will see that after the Muslims conquered Spain, they set up a tolerant and enlightened administration. The acquisition of all kinds of knowledge was encouraged. A great library was set up in Khartubah or Cordoba. Scholars from Europe came to Al-Andalus to study the works of the Greek, Persian, Indian scholars, scientists and mathematicians which has been translated by Muslim scholars including the contributions of the Muslim scholars themselves. Muslim engineers built waterways to irrigate the country and agriculture flourished. Products of iron and steel, copper and bronze, and intricately carved timber were manufactured and exported to bring wealth and fame to Al-Andalus. Great mosques and palaces were built exhibiting a unique architecture much admired by the Europeans.

25. However after some five hundred years the Muslim jurists began to preach against this liberal attitude towards the study of non-religious subjects. The study of the works of the non-Muslims of the past was discouraged. To gain merit in afterlife the only subjects that should be studied were those related to the religion of Islam. Slowly but with gathering momentum the Muslims became ignorant and backward. They paid less and less attention to worldly affairs, allowed their wealth to be dissipated and their military strength neglected. After the death of Al- Mansur in the 12th century A.D. the condition of Al- Andalus deteriorated and it broke up into many small states. The rivalries between these states weakened the Muslims further and one by one they fell before the attacks of the Spaniards. Granada was the last to fall.

26. The Muslim civilisation would have ended then except that at about this time the Turkish Muslim Othmaniah dynasty emerged as a power in the Eastern Mediterranean region. These Turkish Muslims expanded their control over the Muslim Arab

territories in West Asia and North Africa enabling Islam and Muslims to continue to be a strong power in the world. Much of the Balkan states fell under Turkish rule. But the Turks did not keep up with the developments in Europe in terms of industry, especially the development of new weapons. Nor did they acquire contemporary knowledge and skills. Towards the end they were more concerned about dress codes, whether form-fitting trousers and peak caps for the Yaniseri mercenary soldiers were Islamic or not. Lacking modern weapons and troubled by deteriorating discipline, the Turkish army rapidly weakened. The British and the French moved in to instigate the Arabs to rebel against Turkish rule. Hoping to become independent of the Turks, the Arabs forgot about Muslim brotherhood and collaborated with the Europeans to defeat the Muslim Turks. But in the end the Arabs did not get their independence because the British and the French occupied their territories, divided their lands and made colonies of these artificial states.

27. Turkey itself would have become a part of Greece had it not been for Kemal Ataturk who even though he himself claimed to be a secularist, nevertheless lead a strong Muslim Turkish force to expel the Greeks from Anatolia.

28. The history of the decline and fall of Al-Andalus and the Othmaniah Turkish Empire hold many lessons for us, among which is the need for modern knowledge and skills in order to ensure the defence of the ummah. For as long as the Muslims are able in accordance with Islamic teachings to balance religious knowledge with worldly knowledge, they would be strong enough to defend themselves and their religion. When they disregard this teaching and concentrate only on religious knowledge they would become weak and unable to defend themselves against their enemies.

29. It seems that we have learnt nothing from our past, from the rise and fall of the Muslim civilisation in Spain and Northern Africa, and the similar fate that befell the Turkish empire in the East. Every effort to develop the Muslim countries since then has been opposed by Muslim scholars who believe that this world is not for the Muslims, or who believe that there is merit only in studying religion. Other pursuits are considered as secular and worldly, including the defence of Islam and the ummah.

30. The positive teachings of Islam are interpreted in a negative way. Muslim unity is made conditional upon acceptance of a particular belief or political creed. Those who do not accept these conditions would not be regarded as Muslims and unity with them is rejected. When the Quran says that when we judge we must judge with justice, we reject this injunction in

favour of adherence to procedures even if it results in injustice. And many more teachings of Islam are twisted and distorted so that the religion fails to deliver the great promises of Islam.

31. It is not Islam which has resulted in the decline of the Muslim ummah. It is the numerous misrepresentations and misinterpretations of Islam which brought about this misfortune on the Muslims.

32. Recently when Muslim countries were threatened, Muslims in Malaysia like their brothers all over the world prayed for Allah to save the Iraqi Muslims and their country. But their prayers have not been answered.

33. Is it that Allah s.w.t. has abandoned the Muslims? Certainly it is not. In the Quran Allah has enjoined that Allah will not change the fate of anyone (Muslims) unless they strive to change their fate themselves (Surah Al-Ra'du - Ayat 11). Allah has also enjoined upon the Muslims that they must prepare their defences in order to strike fear into the hearts of the enemies and to defend the ummah. (Surah Al-Anfal - Ayat 60)

34. We know that the Muslims have not really tried to change their fate, their weakness, and backwardness. They have not tried to catch up and surpass their detractors in knowledge and the capacity to produce arms, to have disciplined and well-trained forces for their defence. Allah s.w.t. has given them much wealth but they have not used this wealth in the way of Allah. They have made no real effort to unite. They refuse to accept that the world of today is not the same as the world of 1,400 years ago.

35. Frustrated with Israeli oppression and the occupation of their lands, the Palestinians resorted to suicide bombing. Many consider them as martyrs, shahid. Yet the Malaysian security forces which fought successfully to save this Muslim country from falling into the hands of atheists are not considered worthy of merit. Similarly no merit is accorded to the people who study science, mathematics, engineering etc. which are essential for building the defence capabilities of Muslim countries. Nor are the people who industrialise and enrich a country given any consideration. Yet all these people help to strengthen the Muslim ummah and prevent them from being humiliated the way they are now.

36. The Muslims will never be able to bring back the honour and the respect for Islam and the Muslims unless they become capable again of defending themselves. To be capable there are many things that they have to do. I have already mentioned

them. We can restore the glory of the Islamic civilisation if we orientate Muslims towards the need to have all the skills and knowledge to make the Islamic way of life - Addin - admired, respected and held in awe by others.

37. The decision is ours to make. If we think we should restore the glory of Islam and the Muslim civilisation; we should free ourselves from oppression, be capable of defending ourselves, then we have to strive to do all the necessary so-called worldly things. If we think we should not do anything worldly then we should accept the humiliation of Islam, the Muslims and their countries.

38. I have said that the Muslim scholars, the ulamas were and still are the most influential members of the Muslim ummah. They are capable of changing the Muslim mind in any direction. If we think we want to progress and become strong, the ulamas can motivate us. Achieving all the things that our detractors have achieved is not difficult. But we need to be pointed in the right direction. The ulamas can help us do this.

39. Our salvation will not be achieved by blindly killing innocent people. Rather we should plan and execute a long term development plan and to excel in all fields. Our rehabilitation will take a long time. We have to be patient. Innallaha maassobirin. But Inshaallah in the end we will succeed for that is the promise of Allah s.w.t. He will not change our fate until we strive to change our fate ourselves. We must prove to the world that Islam is not an obstacle to progress, that Islam is a religion for all times, that Islam is a religion of peace and stability, that Islam can co-exist in a world where Muslims make up only one-sixth of humankind.

40. As I said it is for us to decide. Your conference is important because it is a conference of the most influential people among the Muslim ummah. If you decide that you want to remove the shame of being looked down upon and trodden under by those who are against us, then you must tell us that you want us to do everything possible to restore our past glory and our great civilisation.

41. That is the decision that you as ulamas will have to make and you have to make this decision by consensus so that different interpretations will not split us further. That is your collective duty to Islam and the ummah.

42. Islam is never wrong. Allah has not ordained that His religion be insulted or denigrated, nor the ummah oppressed and humiliated. The sad fate of the Muslims today is their own doing, their failure to practise the true teachings of Islam. It is for the Muslims to act to resuscitate their religion and

bring back the past glory of the Islamic civilisation. And the ulamas must guide them through the correct interpretations of religious exhortations. But the actual work must be done by Muslims qualified in the various skills. It would be disastrous if the learned in one field assume they are experts in every field.

43. I wish you a successful conference. May Allah s.w.t. bless and guide you in your deliberation. Shukran. Thank you.