

**SPEECH BY TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD AT THE INTERNATIONAL  
CONFERENCE ON MUSLIMS UMMAH IN THE MODERN WORLD AT  
KARACHI, PAKISTAN  
ON FRIDAY, 3 SEPTEMBER 2004**

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**“Challenges facing the Muslim Ummah In the Modern World”**

The challenges facing the Muslim ummah at this stage of modern civilisation are too numerous to list. They will probably depress us because there are so many and so seemingly insoluble.

2. But they all have but one single origin. And that is in our confusion over the different interpretations of the one single Islamic religion that was brought by the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad s.a.w.

3. In the 1400 plus years of Islam many interpreters, teachers, preachers of Islam and plain charlatans have managed to break up the one simple religion that was brought by Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. into a thousand religions which are sometimes so different from each other and even from Islam that it is difficult to identify them as the Islam that was brought by the prophet, the Islam which changed the ignorant Jahilliah Arabs into the founders of a great civilisation.

4. Granted that Islam permits differences in interpretation but how different can they be from the original, fundamental teachings of Islam as found in the Al Quran and the verified Hadith. Certainly not to the extent that Muslims begin to accuse each other of not being Muslims. If we accept as true all the accusations of those of other sects than ours, and also our own accusations against them, then none of us are Muslims – i.e. there are no Muslims in this world now.

5. Today we see the Sunnis and the Shiah, both vehemently maintaining that they are Muslims, but they fight and kill each other because each accuse the other of not being Muslims. Yet the world, the non-Muslims consider both sects as Muslims and do not differentiate between them, condemning both of being guilty of terrorism etc.

6. Then we have the other sects and sub-divisions among the Sunnis and the Shiah, and those not linked to either, yet insisting that they are the true Muslims, that all other Muslims are not true Muslims and need to be corrected, forcibly in some cases. That Islam condemns force is ignored.

7. The result of this fragmentation of a single, simple and forthright religion that is named after Peace is a bitter contest to prove that each is more Islam than the others. This is done more by the outward appearances of the faith than what is enjoined by Islam as found in the basic or fundamental teachings of the Prophet s.a.w.

8. Thus when the Prophet defines a Muslim as one who bears witness that “there is no Allah but Allah, and that Muhammad is his Messenger” and the Prophet was prepared to stop the killing of a surrendered enemy because he made this declaration of faith, most Muslims are not willing to accept this declaration as sufficient evidence of being a Muslim. We stipulate many other conditions which must be adhered to and

practiced or we are prepared to condemn and punish an individual, or a sect of not being Muslim, or Muslim enough. We do this not by consensus of the ummah or through proper ijihad but on our own in accordance with the beliefs of our sect only.

9. The conflicts between the many Muslim sects on the question of Islam and its interpretations have forced us to concentrate on proving that we are Muslims to the exclusion of other things that are also enjoined by Islam.

10. Thus while we are often heard to say that Islam teaches us that we Muslims are all brothers, we do not show our brotherhood as evidence of our faith. We often ignore this completely. Instead we are ready to kill each other. We do not consider Muslims killing other Muslims as evidence that they are not Muslims as much as we consider a slight deviation in dress code as evidence of our lack of faith and deserving of punishment.

11. We know that our religion tells us that it is a sin for a Muslim to kill another Muslim. But we justify our action by claiming that the person or people we kill are not Muslims, not true Muslims according to our own interpretations, etc. We pass judgement on their faith even though they bear witness to the Oneness of Allah, to Muhammad as His Rasul.

12. In the meantime we neglect the other injunctions of Islam. No religion has stressed the need to acquire knowledge as Islam does. The first message of Allah to Muhammad was "Iqraq". We may debate endlessly as to the meaning of the word "Iqraq", but there is no doubt that we Muslims are enjoined to read, and to read means to acquire knowledge.

13. For a time we did. The early Muslims were learned not just about religion but about other fields of knowledge as well. They did not question where the knowledge came from, whether it was from heathens or Christian or Jewish sources. They did not question the nationality of the scholars who pioneered the studies. They learnt the languages of these scholars, acquired the knowledge, translated them into Arabic, researched and added to the body of knowledge that they had acquired.

14. And they became known as the pioneers of medicine, science, astronomy, navigation, mathematics etc. Through their work and the application of their knowledge they built the great Islamic civilisation, superior to the other civilisations, including the Europeans at that time. Muslims were respected and even regarded with awe. There was no oppression or humiliation of the Muslims nor did anyone dare to wrest Muslim land through force of arms.

15. The Muslims were strong in their defence capabilities. And this too is in accordance with the teachings of the Al Quran that Muslims must be capable of defending themselves and instilling fear in the enemy. In the days of the Prophet defence meant possession of war horses, swords, bows and arrows. But the Muslims of the great period of Islamic civilisation knew that the weapons of the time of the Prophet were inadequate to defend themselves and to instil fear in the enemy. And so they built cannons, siege-machines, catapults, warships, along with their superior steel blades. Thus was the Muslim realm effectively defended. Such was the stature of the Islamic civilisation, that even the Christian Spaniards and Jews spoke and wrote Arabic and some converted to Islam.

16. But later came the new interpreters of Islam who condemned learning and acquisition of knowledge other than those about the religion. They insisted that only knowledge of the religion would give merit in the afterlife, would earn places in heaven. Other knowledge was not necessary and would earn no merit for those who pursue them. Later these knowledge were described as secular and against religion. The only people who should be honoured in this life and who should lead in every Muslim society and country are those learned in Islam even if they are ignorant about administration, about development, about defense. To dispute this view is heresy.

17. One of the greatest differences between Islam and the two other monotheistic religions which preceded it is that there is no priesthood in Islam. Indeed it was the system of priests in Judaism and Christianity which lead to the belief that the followers of these two religions had deviated from the teachings of their religions.

18. And so Islam does not allow for the setting up of an hierarchy of priests. There are no Popes in Islam. And there are no provisions for priests to intercede with Allah on behalf of erring Muslims. The faithful communicate directly with Allah through prayers. The learned ones in Islam are required only to explain the more esoteric teachings of Islam as contained in the verses which are allegorical in nature.

19. But we see some of the learned ones apparently assuming roles akin to priests. They build up followings which are based on their particular teachings to the exclusion of other interpreters. And they preside over the religious observances of the community. They even threaten not to perform the prayers for the deceased if he is not one of their followers. They demand unquestioning obedience not only on religious matters but also on social and political matters.

20. It is true that Islam is a way of life, and politics, social affairs and economic affairs cannot be separated from religious affairs. The separation of state from religion is not possible in Islam. The state must obey the injunctions of the religion, but not necessarily be ruled only by those well-versed in religion. Thus while Islam enjoins that the Muslims must be capable of defending themselves, how that defence is to be carried out and how or what weapons are to be produced and used cannot be determined by those learned only in religion. Religion does not specify the weapon, the strategies or the tactics. The injunction in the Al-Quran is to have the capability to defend the ummah and put fear in the hearts of the enemy. The effective word is "defence", not war horses or swords and spears or who the generals should be. But as with other teachings of Islam we stress the form rather than the substance.

21. And it is the same with the governing and administration of the Muslim ummah and Muslim countries. It is not the form of Government that is important but rather that the Muslim Government should be led by competent administrators, should be strong, should be just, should have the capability to cope with the changing times. There is nothing to say that Muslim societies and Muslim countries should recreate the life and the environment that existed at the time of the Prophet s.a.w. before it can be considered as Islamic or before it can survive and prosper. Islam is for all times, not just for the 7<sup>th</sup> Century of the Christian Era or the 1<sup>st</sup> Century of the Hijrah. The attempt to recreate the environment of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century denies the relevance of Islam in terms of time and environment. It only weakens the ummah and renders Islam irrelevant except for the performance of religious rituals. It limits the Muslim way of life, Addin as being possible for primitive situations only. Nor are we asked to retreat and leave this world to

the infidels because the afterlife is permanent and we should only prepare ourselves for it. We are asked to seek hassanah in this world and hassanah in the next.

22. When Allah enjoins that Muslims must strive to look after themselves before Allah would help them, most teachings stress more appeals for help from Allah without equally stressing the injunction to help oneself first. For every misfortune long prayers are prescribed even when the misfortunes are brought about by our own carelessness or failures to do what is necessary in order to save ourselves. There is a tendency to ascribe everything as being preordained although we know that when we do what is necessary to avoid the misfortune, our success too would be regarded as being preordained. So why not do something to help ourselves even as we pray to Allah for help. We are more likely to succeed than with prayers alone!

23. And so because of all these deviations from the teachings of Islam, because of the differing interpretations and the confusions that they cause, the Muslims have become backward, weak and unable to deal with the multitude of challenges they now face. Muslims are being oppressed and massacred by their enemies and even more by fellow Muslims. Some of them are aware of the sad state that they are in but most are in denial, refusing to acknowledge the sufferings and the humiliations they have to endure but instead believing that without any effort on their part they will be saved by Allah because they are Muslims and they have prayed for His help. And finally of course they will receive their rewards in the next world. So there is really no need to strive to save themselves, in this world.

24. The challenge, the true challenge facing the Muslim ummah in the modern world is to speak the truth, to admit that they have strayed from the original and fundamental teachings of Islam. And because they have strayed they have broken up into a thousand religions; criticising, condemning and fighting each other and weakening the ummah.

25. We cannot determine who is right and who is wrong without involving ourselves in endless polemics. But there are verses in the Al Quran which are clear and not subject to multiple interpretations. They are fundamental to the teachings of Islam. These are the verses which declare that all Muslims are brothers, that Muslims must not kill other Muslims, that Muslims only fight against those who fight them, that Muslims must respond to a call for peace, that Muslims must acquire knowledge, all knowledge and not just knowledge of Islam, that Muslims must have the capacity to defend themselves and instill fear and awe in the enemy because of their capacity to do so. If we focus on these and other unambiguous verses and not be distracted by the differences in our interpretations of the other verses, then we can achieve a degree of unity if not full unity. Better still these verses can help the ummah overcome the challenges facing it.

26. Above all Muslims must heed those verses which repeatedly stress that when we judge we must judge with justice, that there is no duress to be applied in Islam, that Islam abhors trouble and those who create trouble, that Islam is above all for peace.

27. We must however reject those who claim that certain verses in the Quran have been expunged. We must reject the justification of unIslamic action based on the claim that the injunctions of the Al Quran no longer apply because we no longer recognise others who claim to be Muslims as being true Muslims.

28. Religion is a powerful force in Islam and many want to avail themselves of this force for their own ends. But despite this we must not weaken the influence of religion on the way of life that we lead. Instead we must use this powerful force. But we must use it according to those basic teachings of Islam over which we do not differ.

29. We know that the earliest adherents of Islam were the ignorant Arabs, the Jahilliah. They were given to feuds, to fighting each other incessantly, to the worship, of stones and idols, to female infanticide, to kidnapping and enslaving women, to unlimited wives. They were not noted for their learning or knowledge, being superstitious and suspicious of everything.

30. Yet we know that upon embracing Islam these same ignorant Arabs were able to unite, to acquire knowledge and skills to spread the teachings of Islam and to build the greatest civilisation which endured for 1300 years.

31. How can it be that we who are already Muslims are seemingly incapable of building a greater Islamic civilisation than the Jahilliah Arabs. How can it be that we have regressed and continue to regress, to be weak and easily oppressed by our detractors and enemies?

32. It cannot be that Islam is the cause of our failures and misfortunes. It must be because we have deviated from true teachings of Islam; deviated because of politics; because of the ambitions of those who yearn for earthly power and positions. For this many have been prepared to abuse the true teachings and to spread their own interpretations so as to justify their ambitions.

33. Surely if we discard the earthly ambitions of our sects and our sectarian leaders and reunite as Muslims, if we go back to the fundamental teachings of Islam as preached by the Prophet s.a.w., as found in the Al Quran and the verified Hadiths, and we practice these teachings; surely if we acquire all the knowledge there is in this world, whatever may be the source, if we inject our Islamic moral values in the application of these knowledge, we hone our skills to the highest level; surely if we use this knowledge to strengthen ourselves; to build the capacity to defend the ummah and our religion, we develop our countries with the wealth that Allah has showered on us; we practise charity not only towards the Muslims but also the non-Muslims, we govern and rule ourselves and our people with justice foremost in our minds as enjoined by Islam; surely if we set aside the esoteric interpretations which divide us; then we must be able to overcome most of the challenges facing us in this modern world.

34. We shall all be well-equipped with the knowledge and the skills to administer and develop our countries, to strengthen them with the defence capability that we are enjoined by our religion to have, and to dedicate ourselves to the service of Islam and the ummah. We should find common grounds between our different sects and disregard or tolerate the differences so that we could be united again and strong.

35. All these may sound very idealistic. It is easy to talk about doing what Islam enjoins upon us but it is not going to be easy considering the nature of the human race whatever may be the religion. But it must be remembered that even the Prophet, the messenger of Allah did not convert three quarters of the known world of his time in one day, or even in the 23 years of his Prophethood. He suffered many failures and

setbacks for years. Even when he succeeded he did not live to see the full extent of the spread of Islam. He saw only a minute fraction of the Islamic world he initiated. His successors worked for centuries to build the glorious Islamic civilisation.

36. If the Prophet cannot do it in his lifetime, can we expect to do better than him? Only the most arrogant among ourselves would dare say that they can.

37. We will obviously take time. It is enough if only a few countries among us try to practice and implement the fundamental teachings of Islam as has been enumerated. We will pray, we will appeal to Allah for His guidance and His help. But we must make the effort to extricate ourselves from this morass that we are in. If we fail we must try again and again until we achieve success. That is what Allah has enjoined upon us, and Allah will surely reward us for our efforts, for obeying his injunctions.

38. We are as well-endowed with the brains and the brawns as everyone else. We can do what others can do. And we can do more, for in doing what we do, we are actually obeying the teachings of our faith, of Islam. This is an ibadah. And we will be rewarded in this world with an honourable life, a good life, free from oppression by others.

39. Will we be punished in the next world for bringing honour back to Islam and the Muslims, for defending them, for the performance of our obligations to Allah all at the same time?

40. I will not answer this. We are facing challenges which can destroy our faith. I am sure you can answer these questions by yourselves.

41. There is basically only one challenge facing the ummah. It is the challenge of admitting the truth that we have strayed from the basic and true teachings of our religion because of earthly ambitions for ourselves, our sects and our race. It is our fault and not the fault of our religion. It is for us to correct these faults.

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