

**Speech by Hon. Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad at the IslamiCity Benefit
Banquet celebrating it's 10th Anniversary on Sunday, April 24th 2005 at
Los Angeles, United States of America**

"Islam the Misunderstood Religion"

Assalamualaikum warahmatulahi wabarakatuh,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I would like to congratulate the organizers on the 10th Anniversary of IslamiCity for their effort. I would like to thank them for this opportunity to speak to my brothers and sisters in America.

A few years back I spoke to a small audience of Muslims and non-Muslims in Oxford University regarding Islam and how it is misunderstood not only by non-Muslims, who think of it as an oppressive religion but also by the Muslim who claims it is the greatest religion which would save mankind but have not saved it. We can easily explain why the non-Muslims misunderstand Islam. But why did I say that the Muslims also misunderstand Islam.

The basis for stating this is simple. We all know Muhammad the Prophet (PBUH) brought only one Islam, just one. But today we have all kinds of beliefs which claim to be the Islamic faith but the beliefs are so different and so inconsistent with each other that each condemn the others as not being Islam or Islamic, condemn to the point of labeling them as apostates against whom they are willing to fight and to kill. For example we are seeing today Sunni Muslims fighting and killing Shiite Muslims every day, each claiming the other is not Muslim. There were no Sunni or Shiite during the time of the Prophet (PBUH).

Which one is right and which is wrong. They cannot both be right because their interpretations are so different that they are killing each other claiming the other is not Islamic. One of them could be right and the other wrong. But which one? Neither Sunni nor Shiite are willing to admit that their sect is wrong and the other is right. Both claim to be right and to fight and kill to defend their assertion. So we do not know who is right. We simply follow the teachings of the sect we were born into - right or wrong. Is it possible that both are wrong? The answer is yes. In the view of those of the numerous other sects, the Alawaites, Druze and very many others both Sunni and Shiite are wrong. For the followers of thousands of imams, only their own imam is right and the others are wrong to some degree or are completely wrong.

Islam does allow for differences in the interpretations. But does it allow interpretations which are so different as to cause accusations of not being Islamic and the believers not being Muslim, so different that each is willing to fight and kill because of what each claim to be heresy on the part of the others.

We Muslims claim that there are 1.3 billion Muslims in this world today. But we do not regard many of these people to be Muslims because of differences in interpretations and practices. So there cannot be 1.3 billion Muslims.

According to each sect there are only a few million true Muslims. The others are not Muslims and therefore are not members of the brotherhood of Muslims. Indeed they are worse than enemies of the Muslims for each is more willing to kill the others than to fight and kill the declared enemies of Muslim and the oppressors of all who consider themselves to be Muslim regardless of their sects.

These enemies of the Muslims do not care whether those they define as Muslims are Sunnis or Shiite, followers of which of the imams of the Sunnis or Shiah or the innumerable imams whose interpretations have resulted in the emergence of the different and differing sects of Islam. To the detractors and enemies of Islam and the Muslims, they are all Muslims, followers of the same religion and therefore deserving of the oppressive treatment meted out to them.

In the meantime we, members of the different sects of Islam, will continue to fight each other, reject the Quranic teachings that all Muslim are brothers and thereby weaken ourselves. Many say that this fragmentation of the Muslim ummah is the work of the enemies of Islam. If that is so why are we allowing them to succeed, why are we retaining and adhering to the different and differing sects that we say the enemies of Islam have created?

No. Let us not delude ourselves. Let us not try to blame our enemies. They are not so smart - Machiavellian that they can so easily break us up and cause us to fight each other so they will gain. The break up of the Muslims is brought about by the Muslims themselves, by their own learned ones who made the interpretations, sincerely and faithfully sometimes but self-serving in many cases. It is they, these interpreters of Islam who have broken us up into so many antagonistic sects. Unless we admit this and stop blaming others, we will not be able to make any corrections, to bring the ummah back together again.

Malays say, when you lose your way, you should return to the beginning, to the starting point and start all over again. We cannot say we have not lost our way when the one Islam brought by the Prophet (PBUH) has now become a thousand Islams. It cannot be that all are right. Some of us or all of us may have lost our way and we therefore need to go back to the start.

What is the starting point? Obviously it is the Islam as taught by the Prophet (PBUH). We agree that most of the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH) are in the Al Quran. Some are in the Hadiths. But the Quran contains two kinds of verses; the very specific ones and those which constitute parables or allegories. The specifics are very clear e.g. that there is no Allah but Allah and that Muhammad (PBUH) is his messenger or that all Muslims are brothers.

If we consider belief in these specifics, qualifies one to be a Muslim then the difference in our interpretations of the parables etc need not divide us. We should all go back to these specific and basic teachings of Islam and, disregarding the differences, we should consider all are Muslims and are brothers in Islam.

Then there are the Hadiths or the traditions of the Prophet (PBUH). We know that by the time Bukhari and others studied the Hadiths in order to verify them there were more than a hundred thousand Hadiths. Bukhari could verify only about 7000. Other scholars differed from Bukhari.

Since all these scholars are normal human beings they are not infallible. Still there are many Hadiths which have been verified by almost all the scholars. These we should accept. The practice of what is enjoined by the Hadiths is not compulsory. They are optional. So if we differ in our belief or practice of the Hadiths it should not make us apostates. We would still be Muslims and as such we can consider each other as brothers and be united.

I am not preaching my own version of Islam. But the great scholars should not just dismiss this because it comes from what the Christians call a "layman". We have no priesthood in Islam. Any man can lead the prayers. Any man can therefore study the religion and try to understand it. We need guidance but we must remember that the guides are also human and such have been their teachings and interpretations that there are now thousands of beliefs which claim to be Islam. They cannot claim a monopoly of knowledge of Islam and a monopoly of interpretation.

Islam is not just a faith, a belief. It is a way of life. And the way of life of the Muslims of today is so varied and different from each other that there is utter confusion. Islam is not meant to confuse its followers and deny their hassanah in this world. If it does then it is not Islam, the religion of Allah. That is wrong, but the numerous and tendentious interpretations of Islam which are wrong. What needs to be corrected is not Islam but the interpretations of Islam by mere man, no matter how learned he may be. If Islam is to bring Hasanah to the faithful then it needs to be interpreted by all who are learned in all fields. And the interpretations should begin from the beginning, from the Quran and the verified Hadiths, without regard for the interpretations of those who through their own understanding and interpretations in the past have divided the Ummah.

Wassalam.