

SPEECH BY: DATO' SERI DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD
(PRIME MINISTER)

EVENT: THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP

VENUE: JW MARRIOT HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR

DATE: 04 MAY 2001

TIME:

I wish to thank the World Evangelical Fellowship for inviting me to share my thoughts with participants at this General Assembly of the World Evangelical Fellowship today.

2. Religion should be viewed as a way of life envisioning, as its ultimate goal, the day when all men can live together in perfect understanding and peace. Historically, the beginnings of a religion are characterised by the proclamation of positive truth in a flush of enthusiasm. After the period of first exuberance, however, there may be long centuries when men have to practise their religion without anything comparable to the initial exhilaration. Thus, even though there is no doubt that many great religions have nurtured and shaped the concerns and commitments of their adherents, nevertheless as humans they can, and sometimes do, direct their faith or religious commitments toward what is not truly the teachings of the religion.

3. Hence, it is not surprising to find history being replete with instances of religious conflicts, coercion, persecution and intolerance even among co-religionists, more so of course against those of other faiths! The highlights are well known to all of us: the struggle over monotheism in ancient Egypt; the bloody suppression of the idolaters in Israel; the trial and execution of Socrates; the killing of alleged heretics by Christians; periodic pogroms against Jews; the Inquisition; the vicious bloodletting of the religious wars between Protestants and Catholics; and so on. In Islam too there have been many so-called 'jihad' against fellow Muslims and persecution of Christians and Jews in their societies. During much of these the true teachings of Islam were ignored or deliberately misinterpreted, as when some Muslims declare other Muslims as apostates and infidels in order to justify their wars against these people.

4. Consequently, there have been numerous accusations by those who are against religion, that it is the source of conflicts, persecutions and injustices. It is also

said to be the opium of life. In a way, a look at the historical facts and evidence will tell us that some of these charges appear to be justifiable. They are in fact difficult to deny. But it is questionable whether they are really due to the true teachings of the religions.

5. Before the rise of the Roman Empire, religious intolerance was the rule rather than exception within their society. Each tribe living within the Empire had its own Gods or Goddesses who watched over its members and governed the area. A person joining the tribe is forced to accept its deities wholeheartedly. The ancient Israelites are known to have committed vicious genocides against neighbouring tribes partly at least due to religious differences.

6. When Christianity was adopted as the religion of the Roman Empire in the late 4th century, instead of tolerance, more intolerance set in. Pagan temples were confiscated, and their priests and priestesses were either persecuted or massacred. Jews in particular were senselessly persecuted as they were blamed for the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Breakaway Christian movements, including the Protestants and the Huguenots, were hounded and forced into exile by the Catholics. In turn the Protestants were intolerant of the Catholics and others and would periodically burn so-called witches.

7. Then there were the Christian-Muslim warring encounters. These prolonged and violent Crusades resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Muslims and Christians. The Crusades were justified on the grounds that the primary aim was to make it possible for Christians to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land without threat.

8. Although the Crusades had no lasting effect in the Islamic world, where they were seen as mere routine frontier skirmishes of two opposing armies, the conflict influenced Christian perceptions of Muslims to this day. That Christians had lived among Muslims in the land holy to both religions was ignored. These Christians were actually slaughtered along with the Muslims because they dress in the same way as the Muslims. And so whole populations of the towns of Palestine were put to the sword. Forty thousand were slaughtered in Jerusalem alone.

9. When the Europeans colonised North America, Africa, South and East Asia and Australia millions of natives were killed through wars or pure genocide because their heathen lives were not regarded as worth preserving. Forced conversions on pain of death were practised especially where the Spaniards and the Portuguese established their colonies. In the process the locals became so divided that they would war against each other to this day. This is what we are seeing in the Philippines and Indonesia and elsewhere.

10. In the 20th century, inter- as well as intra-religious conflicts continue to afflict societies. These include; the stand-off between the Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland that have resulted in thousands of deaths among followers of each denomination, the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s leading to uncountable losses of lives and destruction of properties, the genocide of 200,000 Muslims by Serbian Orthodox Christians in Kosovo, Bosnia and Serbia, and the tragic and cruel killings of Muslims by Muslims in Algeria. In Palestine the cruel killings are going on. The world stood by and hardly raised a finger to stop these modern-day barbarism.

11. Notwithstanding the above, the history of inter-religious relations is also full of anecdotes of cordial interactions between Christians and Muslims. In fact this started as early as the time when Muhammad was appointed Prophet. A Christian, Waraqa ibn Nawfal was reported to have reassured Muhammad that his traumatic experience in the cave on Mount Hira in 610 C.E. was a genuine call to prophet hood. Then the first group of Muslim emigrants sought asylum in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia. The ruler Negus wept when he heard Jaafar ibni Abi Talib reciting verses of the Quran about Jesus. He then exclaimed that, "The difference between you Muslims and us Christians is just this line" - (which he drew in the sand with his walking stick).

12. It is also narrated that when the Christian delegation from Najran came to see the Prophet Muhammad around 628 C.E., they were offered to say their prayers at the mosque of the city. Why did the Prophet open the doors of the Medina mosque for the visitors? He opened them for the sons of his brother Isa or Jesus Christ.

13. Intolerance breeds injustice. Injustice invariably leads to rebellion and retaliation, and these will lead to escalation on the part of both making reconciliation almost impossible. It would appear that during times of stress, despair and frustration, people become increasingly irrational, and they do things which they never think they are capable of. And so we see hideous brutality perpetrated by the most gentle people.

14. Once started religious strife has a tendency to go on and on, to become permanent feuds. The situation is not unlike the tribal feuds which existed among the ignorant pre-Islamic Arab tribes of the Arabian Peninsular. Today we see such intractable inter-religious wars in Northern Ireland, between Jews and Muslims and Christians in Palestine, Hindus and Muslims in South Asia and in many other places. Attempts to bring about peace have failed again and again. Always the extremist elements invoking past injustices, imagined or real, will succeed in torpedoing the peace efforts and bringing about another bout of hostility.

15. Perhaps religion and deep faith makes it impossible for

enmity between people of different religious faith to become reconciled. It is because of this that some advocate abandoning religions and faith in God. Many now openly question the existence or relevance of God. They claim that the world would be better if there are no religions, no belief in God. The question that must be asked is whether the fault lies with the religions or is it with the people practising the religions?

16. Even a casual examination will reveal that the adherents of most religions have deviated from the original teachings. Some have become extreme and fanatical and it is these people who give religions not only a bad image but actually cause religions to deliver the opposite results from what were originally promised. And these people are so seemingly religious that few dared to go against them for fear of being declared heretics. And so we find the simple teachings of the Prophets becoming quite different from the religions that we practise now.

17. The Quran says, "you faithful Muslims, do as we have recommended and what was recommended to Abraham, Moses and Jesus: unite in faith and do not separate". Unfortunately we find the followers of the same religion divided into numerous sects and denominations. Is this what was taught by our religions? Religion should unite not only people of the same faith, but all of humanity, whether they are of the same faith or not. Religion should make people in the East brothers to the people in the West; a white man brother to the black man; it should make the believers merciful and kind to all human beings, even if that person subscribes to a different faith.

18. It is narrated that once when the Prophet Muhammad was distributing alms to the poor, an idol-worshipper asked for his share. Muhammad said to him, "you are not of my religion, so I won't help you". So the poor man went away feeling very sad. At that very moment the angel Gabriel came down from heaven with an urgent message for Prophet Muhammad, which said, you do not have to lead them all to your faith. That is, you, Muhammad is not responsible for the religious beliefs of all people, but for assisting them regardless of their religion. You have to inform them, but whether they follow or not is for God to determine. God shows the right way to whomever He wants.

19. After the Prophet received the angel's words, he said, "send the man back to me". He gave the man what he needed and never again did he refuse to help anyone in need, regardless of religion. God says, "What you give others is for your own good". It is as if humanity is made of one soul, so if the rich man helps the poor man, it is as if he were helping himself. Muhammad like other messengers of God, was human and human beings make mistakes. But God corrects them.

20. The edicts of God the Creator have been brought down from heaven through the Prophets. They are not only aimed at making

peace among people but to encourage them to join hands in brotherhood. Until mankind returns to the true teachings, we will never be able to eradicate intolerance. If intolerance is allowed to spread unabated, then it will spell disaster for mankind. Today we talk about human rights as if we have just realised it. But our religions have promoted human rights thousands of years ago. It is because we have forsaken the teachings of our religion that we now have to rediscover human rights.

21. No one can be held responsible for acts committed by his ancestors. Yet most of us are still fighting each other because in the distant past our ancestors had fought. Because 500 years ago the Turks massacred the Serbs, today the Serbs are still bent on revenge seeking to kill Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo because of what happened 500 years ago.

22. We are now at the beginning of a new century. It is a good time to resolve to break away from the tragedies of the past and to build on the realities of the present.

23. We now know what the 20th century has brought us. We had welcomed free trade and liberalism in the hope that capital will be invested more widely and so help spread wealth throughout the world. Capitalism was rather subdued in the days of Socialism and Communism. The Capitalists showed their friendliest face in order to survive and defeat Communism and Socialism.

24. Now the Socialists and Communists are no more. Capitalism is the winner. The option to defect is gone and Capitalism need no longer be friendly. Greed now rules, unabashed greed, Greed with a capital G. Anything done in order to amass more wealth is legitimate and honourable. Why should anything stand in the way of unlimited acquisitiveness?

25. Perhaps the only hope lies in religion, in the true teachings and not the corrupted teachings. God had always sent Prophets to guide man whenever they strayed away from the right path and suffer as a consequence. We have a need now to return to religion as we face the new culture of greed which is tending to destroy us. It should not be just a renewal of faith but a return to the guiding principles of religion which has always condemned greed.

26. The world, through a combination of God-given resources and human ingenuity in terms of technology has never been so rich as it is now. There really is no need for anyone to take everything for himself in order to be rich. There is enough for all of us to share. Poverty in this day and age is indefensible and a disgrace for the level of civilisation that humans have achieved. No one should be poor if those of us who are not religious are not so greedy. Certainly the rich must not steal from the poor to further enrich themselves. Giving away a fraction of that stolen money as charity cannot be

described as philanthropic.

27. In multi-racial, multi-cultural Malaysia it is also worthwhile for religious leaders to revisit their roles as we move into a new era in the development of society. The greatest contribution they can make is in promoting tolerance among their followers. For example, major religions uphold good neighbourliness and the honouring of family ties. These noble values should be given a strong emphasis in all activities organised by the religious body.

28. Religious leaders may also wish to consider setting up inter-religious working groups at the various levels of the community. These can work to improve mutual understanding, adopting best-practice models from successful experiments where effective local and national mechanisms have been established for inter-communal communication, awareness and acceptance of the undertakings made when one is converting to another religion for whatever reason. Sensitivity to the beliefs of others must prevail. Islam makes it clear that we must accept that others will believe in their own beliefs, worship in their own way. To them their religions, to the Muslims theirs. Just as Muslims must accept the others rights to their own faith, others too must accept and respect the rights of Muslims as Muslims.

29. This is in line with verse 48 of Surah Al-Ma'idah of the Holy Quran translated thus, "To thee (O Muhammad) We sent the scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety. So judge between them by what God has revealed, and follow not their vain 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 and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, 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 to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute".

30. The young generation should be the target of a consistent effort to protect and preserve religious tolerance. Young children are usually free of biases and prejudices. Pupils at the kindergarten level have no qualms about studying and playing together. They often walk hand in hand without the slightest feeling of distrust and insecurity. They provide the best example of tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

31. However, more often than not this splendid and cordial relationship will cool off as they grow up. Parental input and other environmental influences may start to shape their minds. And this will result in prejudices they had not known before. The relevant religious authorities should look into ways of halting the loosening of the bondage of friendship of these young children. They can be made known of each other's similarities and differences, as far as religion is concerned.

And it must be impressed on them that if they could respect one another, then living together as a community, even while professing different faiths, would not be an impossible task at all.

32. The other vital role of religion in this post-modern age is ensuring harmony in society by not knowingly and blatantly sowing the seed of discord. It is true that it is the nature of some religious denominations that propagation of their faith is obligatory. But we should be careful that we don't propagate religions at the cost of conflicts and violence. Such conflicts can only bring about an environment where religions cannot thrive.

33. We must be careful when undertaking matters involving religion. The sensitivity of others of different religious prescriptions must be given due considerations.

34. Let us hope that the 21st century will once again give religions a role in the life of mankind, a role which can be good and constructive provided we do not deviate from the teachings in our attempts to establish the righteousness of our own faiths.