

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

EVENT: ISLAM AND THE UMMAH : REEXAMINING AND REINVENTING OURSELVES
IN THE FACE OF NEW CHALLENGES

VENUE: UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, LONDON

DATE: 22 SEP 2003

TIME:

I have chosen to speak on a very sensitive and controversial subject - Islam and the Ummah: Reexamining and Reinventing Ourselves in the Face of New Challenges. I hope I don't touch any raw nerve by doing so.

2. Firstly, does Islam need to be reexamined? To determine whether it should or should not, we have to understand the fundamentals of Islam, the original Islam as brought and preached by the Prophet, and see whether there is any difference between this Islam and the Islam that we believe in and practice today.

3. We cannot change the fundamentals of Islam or we will be changing the message and the teachings of Islam as brought by the Messenger of Allah, Muhammad s.a.w. We will in fact be changing the religion of Islam. And it cannot then be Islam anymore. All we can do is to determine whether the Islam of today has deviated due to the interpretations of the fundamentals in order to suit changing circumstances. We cannot and must not accept a "New Testament" for Islam.

4. Islam changed the feuding Arab tribes into a united highly organised and sophisticated people who built a great civilisation which lasted 1,300 years. But today the followers of Islam, the Muslims are no longer the great people they were in the early years of Islam. The great Muslim civilisation has almost disappeared and the Muslims today are looked down upon, oppressed and humiliated, their religion said to be a terrorist creed, propagated by a terrorist prophet.

5. Yet we know from the Quran that the Prophet s.a.w brought glad tidings to the human community and promised good to those who accepted Islam.

6. And we always pray to Allah for good (hassanah) in this world, and good (hassanah) in the akhirat.

7. The prayers by Nabi Adam Alaihissalam on his arrival on earth in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 201 clearly

stated that he asked "Our Lord, give us good in this world and good in the hereafter".

8. Can we honestly say that the situation of the Muslim in this world today is good? It certainly is not. And if it is not, is it because of Islam, because of its teachings? Or is it because changes have been made to Islam so that it is no longer in accordance with the original teachings of Islam.

9. Changes occur to everything over time. All religions change over time. All ideas and values change over time. The Christian religion for example has changed and changed again until the early Christians must find it impossible to reconcile their Christianity with that practised today. The sins of yesteryear are now no longer sins so much so that even the priests can indulge in them openly.

10. The same things happen to the ideals of egalitarian ideologies. The French Revolution was supposed to be about liberty, equality and fraternity but no equality was accorded to the aristocrats. Over time the ideals of the Revolution evolved into Socialism, Communism; and then to the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, the Dictatorship of a few in the Communist regimes. Millions were killed during the evolution of the egalitarian ideas of Socialism and Communism. Eventually the ideals of liberty, equality and brotherhood were made convenient excuses for denying them to those opposed to the Communist elites.

11. Today we are seeing the same thing happening to Democracy. It has become an excuse for applying sanctions, denying food and medicine, and finally to war against innocent people, killing and maiming them, invading and occupying their countries. The wishes of the majority are negated by the veto of one, even as it talks about promoting democratic processes. And we can expect more changes to the application of democracy until a dictatorship of democracy eventually destroys the great ideals. As with the communists, the wheel would turn full cycle.

12. Clearly, it is not just Islam which needs to be reexamined. All the religions, the ideologies and the value systems of the world's human community need to be reexamined. But we are of course concerned today with the religion of Islam. Is it the religion that the Prophet, Muhammad s.a.w. preached or is it different? If it is then is it responsible for the sad state of the Muslims today? Or is it because the religion has been changed that it cannot deliver the good that was promised? Is it true as some would have us believe that what the Muslims suffer today have been pre-ordained by Allah and Muslims will just have to endure it? Is it true that they will enjoy heaven in the next

world because of their sufferings on this earth?

13. The Al-Quran says that all that is bad is from us and all that is good is from Allah. So we must conclude that the present miserable fate which we suffer, our oppression by others and the denigration of our religion is due to us, not pre-ordained by Allah. If that is so then we must find out what we have done which is wrong, which is not in accordance with the teachings of Islam, and has brought misfortune upon us. We have to know this and knowing we have to correct ourselves and return to the true Islam so we may once again be blessed by Allah.

14. Islam as all Muslims know is not just a religion, a belief in the one God, Allah, in His Prophet. It is not just about the performance of certain rituals, the avoidance of sins. Islam is a way of Life -- Addin. Islam governs every aspect of the life of the Muslims. It guides their behaviour and everything that they do, as individuals, as a community.

15. But is our way of life today Islamic? Many of us believe that by the Islamic way of life we must wear certain dresses, keep a beard and cover our body or "aurat". But this is not everything as a way of life. We perform prayers, fast, pay the tithes (zakat) and perform the Haj. These are enjoined upon us together with our declaration of faith in Allah and His Prophet. But still these cannot be Addin, a way of life in accordance with the teachings of Islam.

16. Life for the individual and more so for the community is much more complex and involves many more things. We have to eat, clothe and shelter ourselves. We have to secure ourselves from all kinds of dangers which threaten us. We have to ensure good health for ourselves. And this we cannot achieve as individuals. We need the services and efforts of others, the members of the community.

17. The Muslim belongs not just to himself. He belongs to the Muslim community, the ummah. The well-being of the ummah is the responsibility of all the members of the Muslim community. If that well-being is not taken care of by the individuals or collectively by the community, then every Muslim in the community would have sinned. That is what is meant by "fardhu kifayah."

18. While the performance of "fardhu ain" is to gain merit for oneself, "fardhu kifayah" is for the community. Even if one performs "fardhu ain", it does not absolve him from sin if the community needs are not taken care of by some member or members of the community. And so the production of food, clothing and shelter for the community would form a part of the

injunction of Islam, failure in which would bring sin and retribution in the afterlife for all in the community. In fact as we have seen the retribution can come even on earth.

19. Apart from food, clothing and shelter, the human community needs physicians to take care of the individual and the community's health, laws and their enforcement to ensure the security of the community and its members.

20. The Muslim and his community most certainly need religious guidance so there will be no straying from the prescribed path. For this there must be Muslim scholars (ulama) and teachers. But obviously not everyone has to be Muslim scholars or teachers. If all are, then there would be no one to provide the food, shelter and clothing. If that happens then the community including the ulamas would be sinning because there is no one to provide for the non-spiritual needs of the community to enable the Islamic way of life to be lived.

21. The number of scholars conversant with the teachings of Islam must be limited so as to allow for the performances of "fardhu kifayah" by others. Those who perform fardhu kifayah which enables the ulamas themselves to lead an Islamic way of life must surely earn merit. It cannot be that only those who study religion and become ulamas earn merit.

22. The role of the Islamic scholars and teachers is essential but so are the role of the food, clothing, shelter, health and security providers. Since all are performing their duties and contributing to the Islamic way of life, all must gain merit, in addition to the merit gained through the performance of "fardhu ain".

23. Then there is the all-important task of defending the ummah from outside attacks. In the Quran it is enjoined upon the Muslims to prepare for the defence of the community, to have war steeds and the necessary weapons. Unfortunately many stress the horses and the ancient weaponry and not defence. They believe in gaining merit through being able to ride a horse as this was one of the things the Prophet did. If by so doing they cannot defend themselves, in today's world, they seem not to care. The form of the preparation rather than the objective of the preparation is emphasised. We admit that Muslim countries do prepare for their defense, but they have no capacity to invent and produce their own weapons. This is because by and large they neglect the study of those subjects concerned with the invention and production of modern weapons. Once again in interpreting the injunctions of the Quran to read they look at the form rather than the

substance of Islamic teachings.

24. It is the same with regard to the implementation of Islamic law. Despite the Quranic injunction that when we judge, we must judge with justice, we still emphasise the importance of procedures and process, ignoring the injustice that it may cause. Thus if a woman is raped and she lodges a complaint against the rapist, if she cannot produce four witnesses then she is guilty of false accusation and should be whipped. If later she bears a child, then that is evidence of zinah and should be punished by stoning to death. Obviously this particular application of Islamic law ignore the injunction to judge with justice. But the orthodox remain adamant that the procedures must be adhered to even if they result in injustice. If anyone disagrees then he is considered to be against Islamic law and condemned as unbelievers in Islam.

25. Clearly the teachings of Islam is being wrongly interpreted. As a result the good that is promised the believers has not manifested itself.

26. In fact it can be said there is deliberate obstruction so that the Islamic way of life cannot be practised and the good achieved. In the early years of Islam, the Muslims, obeying the injunction to "Read" i.e. to acquire knowledge, studied the works of the Greeks and others on philosophy, medicine, science and mathematics. They actually expanded these fields of knowledge so much so that the Europeans and others had to access the works of the Greeks through the Arabic translations of these works, stored in the great libraries of Spain and present day Iraq and elsewhere. The Muslims were ahead of the rest of the world in agriculture (food), in the production of cotton and silk (clothing) and in architecture and the construction of homes and public buildings. They were good administrators, governing the vast lands which had accepted Islam. And certainly they were able to defend their territories. They were great navigators and traders, enriching the countries they live in and those of their trading partners.

27. Because of the extensive knowledge in all fields of learning and their consequent skills in the acquisition of wealth, in administration and in military defence, the Muslim civilisation thrived and grew enabling the Muslims to live the way of life as prescribed by the Quran.

28. Muslims must refer to the Quran for guidance in life. But for the ordinary Muslim it is not easy to understand the Quran. There are verses in the Quran which are clear and can easily be understood. But most of the verses are in parables and in the form of anecdotes of the pre-Islamic and Islamic period. These

are not precise but because of that they can serve as guides in dealing with worldly affairs resulting from changes with the passage of time. But of course different interpreters may interpret them differently.

29. Unfortunately so varied can the interpretations be that they often contradict each other. Some of the differences in the interpretations are so extreme that they lead to schisms within the Muslim ummah. At the time of the Prophet reference could be made to him and his words would be accepted by all. Almost immediately after his death, the interpretations began to differ and different sects began to emerge. The biggest break-up resulted in the emergence of the Sunni and Syiah sects. But each of these two again broke into the followers of different imams. Then there are numerous other sects resulting from the personal teachings of different scholars and imams some of whom are charlatans. Frequently the sects are so different in the practice of Islam that they accuse each other of no longer being followers of Islam, of being apostates, "murtad". And because of this they often fight each other violently, even go to war against each other. The situation now is not unlike the feuding of the Arab tribes in the pre-Islamic period.

30. Because of the differences and the need to display what is considered as Islamic virtues, the so-called "non-religious" matters were neglected. While the early Muslims had a well-rounded education and knowledge, the later Muslims tend to concentrate on religious knowledge only. Although Muslims do not have a system of priests, nevertheless the Muslim scholars gained a powerful role in the community. If they misinterpret Islam deliberately or otherwise, all their followers do not contradict them. And through the ages many scholars misinterpret Islam for personal gain, giving rise to numerous fanatical feuding sects.

31. Being knowledgeable only in religion, the Muslim scholars downgraded other fields of learning. The number of great mathematicians, scientists, physicians, navigators, astronomers in the Muslim world began to diminish when the ulamas and the Muslim jurists gained power and influence in Muslim Spain. Soon the Muslims lost their lead in those fields of learning which had contributed to the greatness of the Islamic civilisation. They became inward-looking and neglected the development of their countries. They missed the Industrial Revolution completely.

32. But later the division into different sects became complicated with the acceptance by the Muslims of the nation-states. This is an alien concept. The Muslims had no nation-states as such. They belonged to the Muslim community, the ummah. Their loyalty is to the community no matter where they may be. But after the

British and the French broke up the Ottoman Empire, new nation-states were created without regard for ethnicity or even geographical boundaries. Thus Sham which lies to the north of the Arabian Peninsular, to which region the traders from Arabia, including the Prophet used to go, was divided up into Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. The British installed feudal rulers in the territories which came under them, while the French treated these territories as provinces of France. When these colonial territories became independent they became separate states and no longer Sham.

33. Whatever may be the states created by the partition, loyalty to the states now complicate the commitment to the ummah, the Muslim community. And State loyalties lead to conflicts and wars between the Muslims. The arms dealers of Europe enjoyed brisk sale at the expense of Muslim unity.

34. After the collapse of the Turkish Ottomans, the Muslims everywhere became divided and much weaker. In fact for a time there was hardly a Muslim country which was not colonised or dominated by Europeans.

35. Some Muslim reformers then began to question the orthodox views of the Muslim scholars. They wanted to "modernise", to emulate the Europeans. Some went so far as to believe that only by discarding Islam and becoming secular could the Muslims regain their pre-eminence. They achieved very little success in the face of strong opposition by the influential orthodox scholars.

36. The problem was that some of the reformers were too much influenced by the European concept of the separation of state from the church. It may be possible in the Christian context. It is not possible in the Muslim world. Islam is a way of life and a way of life cannot be compartmentalised into spiritual and material. Everything that a person does is part of a way of life. Certainly the system of government of a country and its development is a part of the way of life.

37. It is entirely possible to be Islamic even if a modern administration or system, including democracy is adopted. It is possible if we go back to the fundamentals of Islam. The problem is that Muslims tend to emphasise and venerate the form rather than the substance in the practice of everything. Even in modernisation they look for the form.

38. Thus clothing which are meant to cover the body is translated as the wearing of the Arab dress. That the other forms of dress, including the now universal coat and trousers can also cover the body is regarded as being of no merit, unIslamic. Reading to acquire

knowledge is interpreted as reading to acquire Islamic religious knowledge only. Defense of the ummah is interpreted as veneration of the ancient weapons of war.

39. Perhaps this sounds too simplistic. But what is one to make of the neglect of learning and defence in the Muslim world. Must Muslims forever buy their weapons from others, some of whom may be their enemies? Surely they must have indigenous capacities to invent and produce their defence needs themselves. To do this they must learn science, mathematics, technology and the rest. Far from regarding the pursuit of these subjects as not as good as the study of Islamic theology, it should be regarded as an ibadah, which should gain merit for the individual and merit for the community. But to focus on the defence of the ummah will need political stability and economic wealth. And so Muslims must learn to restrain themselves and to make whatever system of Government they adopt, work.

40. Democracy is compatible with Islam. The Prophet s.a.w. did not create a dynasty. He left it to his followers to choose from among themselves a leader, a Khalifah. It was only later that the Muslim dynasties were set up. One can say that a system where the leader is chosen by an electorate, regardless of his antecedents, is much more Islamic than otherwise. Having been elected, a leader must care for his people, for the ummah. And caring means ensuring his people will have food, clothing and shelter and be secured from domestic or foreign aggression.

41. If the fundamentals of Islam are adhered to, there should not be conflicts and wars between Muslims. The fundamentals cannot differ. Muslims are brothers. This is fundamental to Islam. But we are hardly brothers to each other. We are ready to accuse each other of being apostates and we are ready to kill each other.

42. Islam means peace. We wish peace upon each other. This is also fundamental to Islam. We only fight against those who attack us, be they Muslims or non-Muslims. When the enemy sues for peace Muslims must respond positively. But we are doing none of these fundamental things.

43. Today Muslims are labeled as terrorists. We don't think that it is justified. We may be right. But the fact is that we are killing people because of our anger regardless of who we kill, regardless of the consequences. Admittedly we are desperate and outgunned and there is very little else we can do to defend ourselves against the injustice perpetrated against us. But should we just lash out indiscriminately, killing innocent people, including

those who sympathise with us? Shouldn't we stop to think, to plan and to strategise with ultimate victory as our goal?

44. Is it impossible to do this? If we think rationally, we must admit that it is possible. What have we got after almost 100 years of fighting? Nothing. Even our anger is not assuaged. We are in fact getting more angry.

45. If we think then we must realise that our present predicament is not pre-ordained by Allah. It is entirely due to our own doing. We have neglected and misinterpreted the teachings of Islam. When we should be acquiring knowledge which can help us ward off the attacks against us, we reject such knowledge. We rely merely on praying to Allah for help when Allah has said in the Quran that we have to help ourselves first before He will help us. We have not helped ourselves, not in the right way as prescribed by our religion.

46. We do not have a need to reinvent Islam. Islam is perfect and is for all times. The present age does not make Islam irrelevant. It is relevant if we stick to the fundamentals, if we interpret them correctly. The problem is with the interpretation of Islam. It has not only divided the ummah but it has made the ummah practically illiterate, incapable of dealing with even the simple problems of governing ourselves.

47. The fundamentals of Islam are still relevant. We must go back to the fundamentals, to reading in order to acquire knowledge, to the brotherhood of the Muslims, to the way of life as prescribed by Islam, to the substance of the teachings of Islam in the Al-Quran and the verified Hadis and not to the forms of Islam or the weak unverified hadis.

48. Islam is still the perfect religion. It is the Muslims who are not perfect, who have allowed themselves to misinterpret Islam, to deviate from the teachings of Islam. The Muslims must correct themselves and it is they who must change, not through discarding Islam but through going back to the true, the fundamental Islam. The fundamentals of Islam are good. The early Muslims who succeeded in building the great Islamic civilisation must be fundamentalists, for the numerous and contradictory interpretations of Islam had not yet emerged to confuse and confound.

49. The Prophet brought to us only one religion of Islam. Today there are hundreds of Islams. We have to go back to the one Islam brought by the Prophet. We must do so as thinking Man, not as emotional Man.

50. We can face the challenges of our times not by giving vent to our anger, our frustrations and our

bitterness. We must instead use the brain, that thinking capacity that Allah has endowed us with. We take stock of our assets, we plan and we strategise. And Allah has endowed us with riches beyond imagination. We have certain strengths, which we must identify and apply with wisdom.

51. Above all we must reduce the enmity between us, if not completely, at least selectively to face the threat against us.

52. There is no magic in the successes of our detractors. We can do what they can do. But we have to rid ourselves of the baggage of history and focus completely on the problems we face today. And, Inshaallah, we will overcome the challenges without losing our faith or deviating from the fundamental teachings of Islam.

53. We must certainly re-examine the Islam that we practice. We have no need to reinvent it when facing the new challenges of today. But we must certainly correct the wrong interpretations of Islam if we are to overcome successfully the threats and humiliation that we face.