

A beacon of hope

Address by the Prime Minister in Malaysia

Excerpts of Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi's speech at the World Council of Churches Plenary Commission on Faith and Order Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, August 3, 2004.

It gives me great pleasure to be here today. You have honoured me by inviting me to address such an important gathering of leaders of the Christian faith. It is merely an honour for me. It is also an honour for my country, that you have chosen Malaysia as the venue for the meeting of your plenary commission.

The fact that you are gathered here in a Muslim country gives me great hope that together we can fight the perception that religions are at war, and that civilisations are colliding. Your mere presence in Malaysia is a powerful statement against calls to war. It is a powerful statement against the powerful rhetoric of hate and distrust that is so prevalent in the world today.

I also welcome you warmly to Malaysia because I believe it is important for the citizens of this country to realise that tolerance of other religions goes beyond mere co-existence. It also means engaging with one another, creating and sustaining an open dialogue and building a permanent bridge of co-operation through mutual participation.

The uniqueness of Malaysia

I come here, not just as the Prime Minister of the host country, but as a Muslim who wants to initiate a dialogue with his Christian friends. So that we are able to talk in a world in which it seems increasingly difficult to do so. By now, those who are guests in Malaysia would have been told by your Malaysian friends about the uniqueness of our country. About multiculturalism and diversity flourishing in this land of many cultures, languages and religions. You would have been told that our strength as a nation comes from our differences.

Our diversity does not divide us – it unites us and brings us together. I do not want to claim that there are no problems among the different ethnic and religious communities in Malaysia. I do not want to claim that there are no latent tensions and frustrations. There are still very many things that we need to work on. But if the world ever needed a lesson in diversity and making it work, I am confident that Malaysia can be a showcase.

My country does not enjoy peace and harmony today by accident. Our founding fathers and mothers did not leave it to chance that Malaysia would become a calm oasis of many cultures and religions. What we enjoy today is not something that was created overnight. Malaysia has worked hard for our peace, harmony and prosperity. We have had to sacrifice and we have had to give-and-take. We have fought terrorism and extremism in all its forms. We have protected our

many languages and religions so that our people are free to speak their mother tongues and profess the religions of their choice.

Achieving all this was not easy. At the time of independence, many outsiders viewed Malaysia and concluded that before long, we would descend into civil war. Not only did we avoid this fate, but we built a nation amid all the challenges and difficulties faced by the post-colonial states. This so-called burden of not having a homogenous country did not destroy us, it brought the best out of all of us.

The most important virtue that it brought out in Malaysians was moderation. Moderation has always curbed extremism. It has guarded us from bigotry and hatred. It has allowed us to practise the true teachings of our respective religions.

Whether it is Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism or any of the other faiths professed by Malaysians. None enjoins their followers to hate or hurt those who are of a different faith. By practicing moderation in our respective faiths in the presence of fellow citizens of other faiths, we stay true to the teachings of our religions.

A Muslim leader of all Malaysians

As Prime Minister of Malaysia, I am not a leader of Muslims, but a Muslim leader of *all Malaysians*. Therefore, I have a responsibility not just to my fellow Muslims, but also to Malaysians who profess other religions as well. It is my duty to ensure that their rights are protected, that they are free to practice their faiths, and that they are not persecuted because they are not from the dominant majority.

It is my duty to spread the message of tolerance among all; especially to the Muslim majority. We have seen in other countries how majority groups can easily persecute minorities. We have seen how minorities are robbed of their faith, their livelihood and their dignity.

But promoting moderation is not easy. Many people practise their faith in absolutist terms. To them there are no compromise with others. They also misinterpret the very religion that they profess and claim that there is no such thing as moderation or accomodation, and that the teachings that they believe in must be implemented in a totalitarian way. They refuse to take into account the context of the modern world in which we live. They refuse to understand that so much of religious teaching is shaped by the context of the society in which it originated.

For those who are rigid, dogmatic and absolutist, it does not matter whether you are in the 10th century or 21st century, you must live according to the literal teachings of your religion. This is why I believe it is important to call for moderation in our respective religions. If we fail to do so, we risk having our religion hijacked by those who promote hatred and violence. We risk ceding ground to those who do not see the need to live in peace with other religions. We cannot allow

our religions to be torn apart by extremist impulses and exclusivist doctrines. We must be committed in promoting the values of peace, tolerance and plurality.

The global scenario

The lines of conflict today between religions and civilisations are evident. In the eyes of many Muslims, events in the last three years seem to lend credence to the view that the Christian west is, once again, at war with the Muslim world. Sept 11, the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq and the war on terror have all taken religious undertones. A dangerous but dominant view is that this is a battle between good and evil. This view is dangerous, not just because it does not allow for any middle ground. It is dangerous because it exists on both sides of the divide.

Fundamentalists on both sides hold equally rigid views, recasting this into a religious war, even if they do not explicitly say it is one.

It is fair to say that there is less trust and goodwill between Islam and Christianity than there was a few years ago. As individuals and organisations, we still coexist and co-operate, but the current global scenario had unfortunately burnt bigotry into the collective conscience of our respective communities. Many Muslims the world over feel that the war against terror is a war against Islam and no amount of reassurance from the west that it is not will convince them otherwise. The reluctance of the west to recognise and address root causes of terrorism seems to confirm the view that Muslim grievances are not important. For example, the lack of progress in resolving the Palestinian issue continues to be a principal cause of hatred in the Muslim world towards those who have the power and influence to push the process along. Palestine has become a symbol for the Muslim world. Muslim terrorists may not have direct links to Palestine, but it has become a symbol for their cause. We cannot de-link Palestine from the war against terrorism. I know that Muslims are responsible for a number of the terrorist acts committed today. I also know that they purport to do all these evil things in the name of Islam. But they are in the minority. They do not speak for Islam. They are misguided and their efforts are giving Islam a bad name. Because of their actions, and the reaction provoked by their efforts, the majority of Muslims, who are peaceful, moderate and tolerant of other faiths, feel as though they are the victims of a global campaign against Islam.

I ask that you look beyond the sensational headlines and oversimplified categorisations, so that you can appreciate the real problems facing the Muslim world. We need more than ever today a concerted effort to initiate inter-faith dialogues. We need to talk to one another openly about the issues that impact on all our lives. Let us go beyond arguing over differences in theology and religious practice.

Lessons from our shared past

A meaningful dialogue will not be possible if we do not respect each other's freedom of worship. Islam enjoins pluralism and we are reminded of it in the Quranic verse "to you your religion, to me my religion". Let us set aside our religious differences and talk about the issues that affect all of us, whatever our faiths. Injustices in the global financial and trading system, the threat to the environment, poverty and disease; these issues affect us whether or not we are Muslims, Christians, Buddhists or Hindus.

We must see beyond narrow parochialism. For far too long, the various religious communities of the world have lived apart, and these divisions have been sustained because of a narrow outlook that sees religious identity in exclusive terms. Yet, what does it mean to be a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu or a Buddhist today? Does it mean belonging to an exclusive group? Does it mean belonging to a community that is entirely self-dependent and cut-off from others?

We must remind ourselves that all the major religious-civilisation systems of the world have been engaged in meaningful and practical dialogue for centuries. Islamic civilisation would not have developed as it did without sustained contact with the Judeo-Christian west, and with South Asian, Southeast Asian and Chinese civilisations. Likewise Christian civilisation developed in contact with Islam and with the cultures of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Interaction between Christianity and Islam has remained porous, fluid and flexible. It has allowed for the entry of new ideas, philosophies, arts and technologies that enabled both to benefit.

Our shared collective past has not been free of conflict. We know that the rise and spread of Christianity and Islam - as with other religions - has been accompanied by war and conflict. However, it would be wrong to say that the historical relationship between Christianity and Islam was based solely on antagonism. Contrary to those who claim that Islam has "bloody borders" with Christianity, it was in communities that served as the contact points or interfaces between Islam and Christianity that we saw the emergence of societies that were cosmopolitan, diverse, eclectic and constantly evolving. It was in these shared territories that both Muslims and Christians were at their most open, pluralistic and tolerant: witness the cultural vitality and dynamism of Cordoba and Moghul India.

History teaches us that working together has made our civilisations richer and more tolerant. This spirit of co-operation between our religions must once again illuminate the world. For millions in the world today there is little to look forward to. Poverty, natural disasters, war and conflict affect too many. There are solutions to many of the problems that humankind faces today. But sometimes the solutions are not forthcoming because we refuse to build an international consensus that can generate the political will for change.

Our common values

This is where inter-faith dialogue comes in. There are values common to our faiths. Peace, friendship, co-operation. In Islam, there is the Quranic verse, "O mankind! we created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other, not that ye may despise one another". Similarly, there is also the Biblical passage " they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more".

These are the common values we have, that if we hold on to these principles, we hope to God, that this world would be more peaceful in the future. Let us be true to the teachings of our faith and find solutions to the world's problems through our shared values. The Palestinian issue or the conflict in Iraq are not just Muslim grievances. These problems are of universal concern. The Palestinian problem is a problem of fundamental human rights and dignity. The Iraqi problem is a problem of securing peace and nation-building.

In Malaysia, these problems have received widespread support from people of all faiths - Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and others. We are thankful that the Catholic and Anglican churches stood up against the decision to invade Iraq and saw the issue in universal terms. Similarly, globalisation that benefits the rich and not the poor is a global concern with no regard for the religion of those who are marginalised.

Religion must be a beacon of hope

With all these problems surrounding us, religion must be a beacon of hope. Religion must bring out the best in us and not the worst. War and acts of terror must not be fought in the name of religion. Religion must guide us towards conflict resolution, towards peace, towards a more just and equitable world order.

I wish you well in your activities over these few days. I hope that you let Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia; this time, this place, however imperfect or contradictory, speak to you against the backdrop of a world very much in need of the peace which makes justice possible and the justice which makes peace real. With all its challenges and opportunities it has been our home, and has spoken to us. I hope you enjoy the hospitality of Malaysia.

As you go about your deliberations, I ask you to join me in calling upon all people of faith and all people of goodwill to unite and work together for the sake of peace and justice. We cannot stand before a compassionate God while there is so much we have left undone because we are disunited. There is so much we could do, having recieved one another, to recieve others.