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### ISLAM

### *The Misunderstood Religion*

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by

The Hon. Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad  
Prime Minister of Malaysia

I would like to express my appreciation to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies for inviting me to talk on Islam. I have chosen 'Islam - The Misunderstood Religion' as the title of this talk. I do not claim to be an expert or an ulama, an Islamic scholar, but it would be fatal for me to say that I am not qualified. Many who speak on Islam and claim to be 'ulama' are also not qualified. I do claim that I have much a right to speak on Islam as many others who speak on the subject.

Islam is perhaps the most misunderstood religion in the world today and indeed throughout history. It is not only misunderstood by non-Muslims, but it is also misunderstood by Muslims themselves. How else can there be so many Muslim sects with beliefs and teachings which are so different and contradictory? Some must be wrong, the result of not understanding or misunderstanding Islam.

One of the missions of the Prophet of Islam was to bring peace and unity to the feuding tribes, the Jahiliah or the ignorant Arabs of the pre-Islamic days. This he succeeded in doing as narrated in several verses of the Qur'an.

The messages of Allah were brought by one Prophet and recorded in one Qur'an. There is no other Qur'an, or versions of it, or editions which carry different texts. The Qur'an is not in the form of Gospels by Muslim saints or 'ulama'. The Qur'an is just the record of the messages of Allah in the Arabic of the period. Translations of the Qur'an may be different in minor ways, but they are not accepted as the Qur'an. Only that in the original Arabic is accepted.

So there can be no differing texts or Gospels or versions which can result in differences in the messages or teachings of Islam. Yet, clearly there are differences, serious differences, so serious that Muslims are divided sometimes into warring sects. Why is this so?

Actually people who are merely literate in Arabic cannot understand the language of the Qur'an, or at least the whole of it. To understand, explanations must be made by those learned in Islam, the 'ulamas', who understand the language of the Qur'an and are knowledgeable of the circumstances under which the messages were revealed to Muhammad. Most of the messages were about or referred to events which occurred before or during the life of the Prophet.

The 'ulamas' felt a need to add words to the verses in order to make them clearer. These words are bracketed particularly in translations of the Qur'an and are clearly not part of the original message. They are necessary in order to make the messages clearer.

Although there is only one Qur'an, there are two categories of verses in the Qur'an; the specific or 'Muhkamat' and the general or 'Mutashabihat'. There should be no mistaking the meanings of the specific verses, but in fact interpretations differ due to elaborations by the 'ulamas'. But the general ones are more subject to differing interpretations. In Chapter 3 Verse 7, Ali Imran

the Qur'an states, "It is He who has sent down to you (Muhammad) the book (Qur'an). In it are verses that are entirely clear, they are the foundations of the Book, and others not entirely clear".

The general verses must necessarily be so for they are intended to provide guidance in different situations and for untold problems that Muslims have to face not only during the life of the Prophet but for all times. The learned in Islam, the 'ulamas' can refer to these verses for guidance on any and every issue or problem.

The procedures for referring to the Qur'an and interpreting the verses have been determined by the early Muslim jurists in order to prevent casual interpretations. But since the procedures were made by mere men, however learned they may be, misinterpretations and wrong usage can and may occur, leading to wrong teachings.

The procedures involve, firstly, reference to the 'sunnah' or traditions of the Prophet and secondly through 'Ijmak' or consensus of opinions of the 'ulamas' or scholars. Where the Qur'an or Hadith are not clear, the scholars may express an opinion or 'ijtihad', by analogy or 'Qias' or through 'Istihsan', the use of the capacity to think, applying the Qur'an to the realities of the situation.

The Qur'an is comprehensive and provide guidance for all things at all times but clearly if individual verses are taken in isolation, the teachings can become distorted and contrary to the teachings of Islam as a whole.

Thus justice and avoidance of injustice is stressed in numerous verses of the Qur'an. Yet the tendency is to take just one verse and to interpret it without concern for the result, justice or injustice. And so Islamic justice can become quite contrary to the claim that Islam upholds justice.

After the Qur'an, the next most important source of Islamic teachings are the 'Hadith' and 'Sunnah' of the Prophet i.e. his sayings and deeds as related by those who had heard or seen him in his lifetime. These must be good and truthful witnesses and these traditions must be passed on by word of mouth through reliable good Muslims through the years. With the passage of time, identifying a series of good Muslims who related these traditions became more and more difficult. By the time Imam Bukhari studied and sifted through the 600,000 odd 'hadiths' and 'sunnah', 200 years had passed. The learned Imam selected only about 7000 as 'sahih' or genuine which he recorded. His students, Muslim, verified even a lesser number. Other learned theologians verified numerous others.

These collection of 'Hadiths' and 'Sunnah' are now accepted as genuine by most Muslims of the Sunni sect. The Shiites have their own verified traditions.

Since the learned Imams and scholars were not Prophets but were mere men, they too could be wrong. The traditions which they reject may be genuine and those they accept may not be genuine. Of course, many still quote unverified hadiths.

Sometimes the pronouncements of the religious authorities at a given time and in a given situation are mere opinions or 'ijtihad', based no doubt on their wide knowledge of Islam and their understanding of the problem or the situation. But again these are the opinions of very human individuals and they too can be wrong. In today's world, with the advances made by science and technology, new problems often arise. In the medical world all sorts of procedures and cures are being devised all the time. Some of these procedures alarm even the agnostics. Yet Muslim 'ulamas' are often asked to make a ruling.

To do so they must understand not just the injunctions of Islam but the very complex nature of the subject requiring a ruling. The most learned 'ulama' cannot possibly know everything about everything. They must rely on the expertise of others. Even then they may still not understand all aspects and the religious implications of the problem. They may reject simply because they cannot understand or because they are dogmatic. And of course one 'ulama' or one group of 'ulamas' may reach quite different conclusions from those of another 'ulama' or group on the same subject. Both cannot be right, although both can be wrong. It may require further consultations before an acceptable interpretation can be made which is compatible with the realities of the situation.

The 'ulamas' or the learned in Islam are admittedly indispensable to the understanding of Islam. Even those layman who understand Arabic and the language of the Qur'an need them. For non-Arab Muslims the 'ulamas' must also be linguists in order to explain the Qur'an verbally or in written form. Such translations of the Qur'an and 'Hadith' invariably contain a lot of bracketed words which help to interpret the particular verse but which are not a part of it. The choice of words reflects the particular 'ulamas' understanding. It may also reflect the views and opinions of the 'ulamas'. Again as the 'ulamas' are not prophets they may be quite wrong.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency among Muslims to treat the pronouncements of the 'ulamas' as 'infallible'. There are any number of people who claim to be learned in Islam and call themselves 'ulama'. Some of these are clearly charlatans and people with vested interests, including, of course, politicians with very worldly personal ambitions. If all these people are considered to be the successors of the Prophet and are qualified and infallible in their interpretations of Islam, then it is easy to see why there is confusion and misunderstanding of the teachings of Islam.

Thus not so very long ago Muslims considered even the printing of the Qur'an as forbidden,

`haram'. For a long time the Turkish Government which bought a printing press was not allowed to use it. The Qur'an must be handwritten. Electricity was considered as haram for use in mosques. Mecca was lighted by oil lamps long after electricity brightened the cities of the rest of the world.

Turkish soldiers were forbidden from wearing western-style trousers and peak caps because these too were considered `haram'. Paintings of humans or animals were banned until the advent of printing, photography and the television rendered the ban impractical.

Yet all these pronouncements had been adhered too religiously for centuries by Muslims.

But these are trivialities. They do the Muslims no real harm although they may have retarded the progress of the Muslims in a fast changing world. Much more serious are the `fatwas' which relate to the relationship within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The Arab society at the time of the Prophet was given to feuding, incessant wars between tribes which weakened them and retarded their progress.

The feuds were the result of excessive tribal loyalties. Those given to these excesses were said to be `taasub' or fanatical. Islam condemned this excessive tribalism or fanaticism and the Prophet preached against it, promoting unity instead.

Thus in Chapter 3, Verse 103 the Qur'an says: "And hold fast all together by the Rope (religion) which Allah (stretches out for you) and be not divided among yourselves, And remember with gratitude Allah's favour on you, for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace You became brethren".

But after the Prophet passed away, the Arabs returned to their feuding ways. Tribal loyalties returned. Disputes over which tribe had the right to succeed the leadership of the Muslim `ummah' after the death of the Prophet eventually led to the most serious schism among the Muslims. The followers of Saidina Ali, a nephew of the Prophet who became the fourth Caliph, broke away to eventually found the Shiite sect, while the followers of `Muawiyah', claiming to abide by the traditions, formed the Sunni sect. Subsequently both the sects divided up again and again as different `Imams' and `Ulamas' interpreted the teachings according to their own understanding or sometimes their political affiliations.

The feuding between the Muslim sects and the Muslim nations are obviously contrary to the teachings of Islam. Certainly the fanaticism and violence with which they oppose each other, reminiscent of the pre-Islamic and Jahiliah days of feuding, is not in keeping with Islamic

teachings.

### Muslims and non-Muslims

That there is a misunderstanding among Muslims regarding the teachings of Islam on relations with non-Muslims is even more obvious. The Qur'an clearly stated that the Christians are the friends of the Muslims. Indeed, when the first few converts to Islam were persecuted by the Quraish idol-worshippers, they were advised by the Prophet to seek refuge in Christian Abyssinia. The Christian King of Abyssinia protected the Muslim refugees so well that attempts by the Quraish to extradite them failed.

If the Sunnis believe in the Traditions, surely being friendly with Christians should be one of their beliefs. But we know that Muslims do not accept this. The 'ulamas' explain that the present-day Christians are not the Christians referred to in the Qur'an. And, therefore, they are justified in regarding all Christians as enemies.

All Jews are also regarded by Muslims as enemies because the Jews of Medina had been disloyal to the Government of the Prophet. Yet the Qur'an states that only those who take up arms against the Muslims are their enemies.

In Chapter 2 Al-Baqarah Verse 190, the Qur'an states:

"Fight in the cause of Allah  
whose who fight you  
but do not transgress the limits  
For Allah loveth not transgressors."

In Chapter 8 Al-Anfaal Verse 61, the Qur'an stresses:

"But if the enemy  
Inclines towards peace  
Do thou (also) incline  
Towards peace and trust  
In Allah, for he is the One  
That heareth and knoweth."

This means that the Zionists and their supporters who advocate violence against the Muslims must be regarded as enemies. But when they sue for peace they should get a positive response from the Muslims.

Yet Muslims regard all Jews as eternal enemies against whom Muslims must forever fight. This sounds very much like fanatical feuding and against the teachings of Islam. But woe betide

anyone who may suggest that the Jews are not the eternal enemies of the Muslims.

### Misunderstanding among non-Muslims

If Muslims frequently misunderstand certain teachings of Islam, the misunderstanding among non-Muslims, in particular Jews and Christians about Islam and Muslims today, is even worse.

The clash between Muslims and Christians occurred quite early when Byzantium was still a Great Empire and stood in the way of the spread of the Islamic faith. But Christian Europe really worked up feelings against Islam during the time of the Crusades. The Crusaders whipped up anti-Muslim feelings to a frenzy. The perpetuity of this anti-Muslim feeling and the consequent violence against them can be described as a kind of feud.

And so the deliberate whipping up of anti-Muslims feelings has been going on for centuries. Nothing good that Muslims do, in particular in their relations with non-Muslims, is recognised. Thus the fact that Christians and Jews could practise their religions in Muslim Spain was hardly ever mentioned in European history books. The fact that the Christian reconquest of Spain led to the expulsion of the Muslims and the Jews, or forced conversion or execution has never been condemned. That Jews actually preferred migrating to Muslim North Africa rather than stay in Christian Spain is regarded as of no significance.

In the Balkans the mainly Christian Slavs preferred Turkish rule to that of Christian Byzantine. They actually helped the Turks to defeat the Byzantines. For the most part they were not converted to Islam, but remained Christian, surely testifying to the liberalism of the Turks towards non-Muslims.

The misunderstanding of Islam by the West today is perhaps at its peak. Forgetting that Christianity too had experienced extreme aberrations as exemplified by the Spanish Inquisition and the burning of witches in Europe and America, the West has made aberrations in the practice of the Muslim faith by a minority of Muslims as the true manifestation of Islam.

No one, Muslim or non-Muslim, can deny that there have been a lot of terrorist acts perpetrated by Muslims. But then a lot of terrorism has also been perpetrated by non-Muslims. The difference is that if a Muslim does it, the deed is immediately attributed to his faith. When a non-Muslim commits the most heinous of terroristic crimes, his deed is not linked to his religion.

The immediate reaction to the bombing of a government building in Oklahoma was that it was another Muslim terrorist act. When it was discovered that it was not a Muslim who did it, the fact that the bomber was a Christian was ignored. It was not described as Christian terrorism.

The bitter fighting in Northern Ireland involves religious differences between two Christian sects. But at no time have the bombings, killings, maiming by the IRA and their Protestant rivals been termed Christian terrorism or Catholic or Protestant terrorism.

But the terrorism by people of the Christian faith in Northern Ireland pales into insignificance when compared to the brutality of the Christian Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Tens of thousands of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been raped, starved, tortured and massacred by the Serbs. Mass graves are found everywhere. The Bosnian Serbs openly declared that they were carrying out 'ethnic cleansing' in order to prevent the setting up of a Muslim nation in Europe. Because of certain implications, Europe refuses to describe 'ethnic cleansing' as 'genocide' which is what it really is.

Yet at no time have the massacres and terrorism by the Christian Serbs been described as Christian terrorism. Instead, European forces willingly handed over safe havens for the Muslims to the Serbs who subsequently massacred thousands of young Muslim men.

Supposing, just supposing, it was the Muslim Bosnian Slavs who had the weapons and the numbers, and they were supported by Muslim countries and they had committed the atrocities, the world would be screaming Muslim terrorism from the mountain tops. And NATO would have moved in and ended the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina in no time.

But such is the perception of Muslims by the West that it is not even noted that the victims of Muslim fanatics and the misnamed fundamentalists are insignificant compared to the numbers of Muslims and non-Muslims who have been massacred by terrorists of the Christian faith. The misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims is such that the West naturally assume that terrorism is a Muslim creed and is confined to Muslims. Evidence to the contrary are just ignored.

There have been a few Western writers who have tried to be factual and fair. But these writers are either ignored or condemned. Attempts by Muslims to point out that the Muslims who are terrorists are a minority and that Muslims desire peace as much as anyone else have also been brushed aside.

## Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is the most abused of words. It is equated with extremism. Yet if the teachings of Islam are studied, it would be clear that the best Muslims are the fundamentalists. The fundamentals of Islam are based on peace. Indeed, Islam means peace. The people who are usually described as fundamentalists are far from following the fundamentals of the Islamic religion. On the contrary, they are people who reject the teachings of Islam or who deviate from



them. Most of them have seemingly reverted to the pre-Islamic 'Jahilliah' ways of extreme loyalty to their groups, to fanaticism or 'taasub'.

In calling these deviationists Muslim fundamentalists, the West has displayed its lack of understanding of Islam. The West certainly fails to appreciate the problem faced by many Muslims. When beliefs are strong and widespread, whether they are right or wrong, it is not easy for anyone to differ. To do so would risk accusations of heresy. The consequences can be very unpleasant. People who go against these extreme deviationist groups risks ostracism or even violence. For these reasons the majority prefer not to be openly critical or to oppose. But when non-believers condemn all Muslims as terrorists and plain bad people, they certainly are not being helpful. They are simply pushing the good Muslims into the arms of the deviationist.

Islam is the religion of people who once dominated the world; dominated it not only in terms of territorial size and political strengths, but in terms of the sciences, the arts, technology, skills in exploration, navigation and in trade and industry. For almost 800 years the Muslim Arabs ruled the largest empire known up till the 15th century and then the Muslim Turks and Mongols presided over an even bigger Empire.

Empires, of course, rise and decline and the Muslim Empires did not escape this cycle. But throughout, their greatest foes were the Europeans. Having embraced Christianity, another Asian religion, the Europeans were quite fanatical in their opposition to Islam. From the very beginning there was a deliberate campaign to distort Islamic teachings, to prevent the Europeans from understanding it and so risk their conversion.

It is not surprising that the fall of the Turkish Empire was largely due to the machinations of European powers. Playing on Arab nationalist sentiments and the promise of independence from Turkish rule, the European powers obtained Arab cooperation to break up the Turkish Empire. But almost immediately the Arabs found that they had exchanged domination by fellow Muslim for European domination. All the Arab territories were occupied and exploited by the Europeans.

Despite their enforced close association with the Muslims in their Middle Eastern and North African empires and elsewhere, no attempt was made to understand Islam and its influence on Muslim life and thoughts. There was always that latent antagonism which the Europeans never manifested against other non-Christian faiths. While many races which came into contact with Islam accepted it to some extent, the Europeans almost universally rejected it.

The people of European origin of today may not be so fanatically Christian but the attitude towards Muslims and Islam remains. And this is manifested in very painful ways for the Muslims. Whole nations are isolated, blockaded and punished for the faults of a few. Muslims were allowed to be slaughtered in full view of their so-called European protectors.

Is it any wonder that the Muslims are bitter and seek to avenge the wrongs visited upon them? Is it any wonder that they resort to violence? But still only a few do so.

The Europeans should be able to understand this, for this is also the European reaction to their real or imagined repression by their own people or others. But no attempt is made to understand or appreciate the frustrations of the Muslims. True, the fall of the Muslims and the deterioration in their practice and interpretation of Islam can largely be blamed on them. But the anti-Muslim propaganda and deliberate misunderstanding of the religion by the Europeans have merely aggravated the frustrations of the Muslims.

Malaysia has a Muslim majority and the Government is Muslim dominated. Although the Muslims have sufficient majority to rule the country on their own, they have chosen not to do so. Instead they deliberately chose to share power with the non-Muslim minorities.

In 1969 race riots broke out in Malaysia, resulting in some 200 people, mostly non-Muslims, being killed. An emergency was declared and the Muslim Malays took over the Government. The Western press declared that democracy was dead in Malaysia and wrote it off as another developing country destined for the waste-basket of history.

59. Yet today Malaysia, still under a Muslim dominated Government, is peaceful, stable and prosperous, growing at 8 percent per annum for almost 10 years. The Muslims of Malaysia are apparently not terrorists. Indeed, they have proven themselves capable of living and working with non-Muslims to create a united and progressive nation.

There are no feuds in Malaysia; not between Muslims nor between Muslims and non-Muslims. The official religion of Malaysia is Islam but Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist temples and Christian churches are to be seen everywhere. Religious festivals of the different races and faiths are celebrated by everyone together. The non-Muslims in Malaysia do not regard Muslims as terrorists or Islam a violent creed.

One would have thought that Muslims and non-Muslims would look to Malaysia as an example of the practice of Islam. But the West and their media refuse to recognize that the Muslims of Malaysia actually exemplify the teachings of Islam. They prefer to regard Malaysian Muslims and their behaviour as aberrations. They keep on asking about fundamentalism in Malaysia and when told that there are really no Islamic fundamentalists of the kind they describe, they reject the claim. The prejudice against Islam and Muslims remains even with Malaysia.

Islam is indeed a misunderstood religion. Such is the misunderstanding and the prejudice against it that Muslim and Non-Muslim alike often regard it as an impediment, as a barrier to good

peaceful relations between Muslims and non-Muslims and even between Muslims and Muslims. Both regard this religion that brought greatness to the Arabs and built a very progressive empire as being responsible for everything bad that happened between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Ignorant of the teachings of Islam and frustrated by the apparent failures of Islam and with their own countries, some Muslims tend to deride and even condemn the religion. Others, again due to frustration with the Muslim communities in which they live and ignorant about the teachings of Islam and its history, suggest that the Qur'an itself is at fault and needs to be revised.

When such frustrations are aired, the western media, the principal guide to western intellectual thinking, would make heroes or heroines of these religiously illiterate and untutored people. The Western countries would confer upon them awards and make them out to be brave people fighting the injustices of Islam.

The West would love to hear me condemn the religion of Islam for the failures of Muslims and their nations. But I know that their concerns about Islam and the Muslim are at best academic. I suspect that all they want to see is the removal of Islam as a faith, the way that Communism was debunked. But that will not serve the cause of good inter-religious or non-religious relations between Muslims and the others.

The answer lies in correcting or abandoning the tendentious and incorrect interpretations of Islam by some of the 'Ulamas'. These interpreters of Islam, no matter how learned they may be in the teachings of the religion or how large may be their following or how established are their teachings, are not prophets. There is only one prophet for the Muslims and he is Muhammad, the last of Allah's messenger who brought and spread the faith of Islam among man. Muhammad and the Qur'an cannot be wrong but the interpreters of Islam can be.