

Muslims must 'grow up' amid growing threat of sectarianism

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Mar 11: Muslim scholars who appear to get easily 'hurt' by opinions and interpretations of Islam outside their own schools of thought have been told to be more realistic.

"My message to them is 'grow up'," said Dr Syed Farid Alatas, the prominent Malaysian professor who heads the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore.



■ L-R: Hashim Kamali and Farid Alatas

Alatas was responding to a question posed by a participant during a seminar yesterday on the growing threat of sectarianism among Muslims, organised by three local Islamic organisations.

Besides him, other speakers at the seminar, themed "Islam Without Sectarianism" and moderated by well-known writer and social critic Dr Farish Noor, were Prof Karim Crow from the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS), Dr Haidar Bagir from Indonesia's Paramadina University, and Dr Mohamad Hashim Kamali, chairman of IAIS who delivered the inaugural speech.

The event was jointly organised by Muslim youth group Islamic Renaissance Front, IAIS and leading Islamic publisher Islamic Book Trust.

Although there are many sects within Islam, it was the divide between Shiites and Sunnis which dominated the discussion, and understandably so, owing to widely reported sectarian violence in Pakistan.

In his speech, Prof Kamali touched briefly on the early rise of schools of thought (*mazhabs*) in an atmosphere of mutual respect. He however said recent developments in Iraq and Pakistan, where thousands have been killed by sectarian violence, had reared sectarianism's ugly side.

He pointed out that despite this, most authoritative Muslim scholars continued to call for *taqrib*, or the rapprochement of the *mazhabs*, most notably between Shiites and Sunnis, by urging an end to condemnatory rhetoric between them.

"The Amman Message was a strongly worded fatwa coming from leading Sunni and Shiite scholars denouncing the idea of charging Muslims of any sect as *kufir* [disbelief]," he added, referring to the declaration by prominent Muslim scholars and leaders in 2004.

Kamali said while it would not be practical to abolish the *mazhabs*, Muslims "should focus on commonalities and we have so much of that", reminding that Imams of the various *mazhabs* had left Muslims with a legacy of respect and not hatred.

Laughing stock

Alatas meanwhile was more curt in his appraisal of sectarianism, and narrowed down to the rise of intolerance around the world, including Malaysia.

He said it was unfortunate that Malaysian religious authorities too played their part in the process, getting involved in the demonisation of the 'other', in this case against the Shiites, whose local population is negligible.

He warned that by continuously propagating stereotyped views on Shiite dogmas through the government media, the country risked becoming a laughing stock in the Muslim world.

"Malaysia is becoming a laughing stock in the international Muslim community, because no serious [Sunni] Muslim scholar demonise the Shiite scholars. Remember, the Shiites go to Hajj and no non-Muslims could attend the Hajj, and Iran is a member of the OIC," said Alatas.

He named several prominent Sunni scholars of the past who had recognised Shiism as part of the *Ummah*, including past Grand Shaykhs of Al-Azhar University, most notably Mahmud Shaltut through his famous fatwa of 1959. Others were the prominent Muhammad Abduh, Salim Bishri, Muhammad al-Madani, Sayyid Sabiq, Hasan al-Banna and Syed Tantawi.

"You will not find a serious Sunni scholar who would define Shiites as not legitimate," he stressed.

He said efforts to bridge sectarian gaps continued even today, and gave the example of co-organiser IBT's titles being displayed outside the conference hall, praising its selection of titles for representing both Sunni and Shiite writers.

Alatas argued that many practices in Shiism, while questionable, such as the commemoration of the Karbala tragedy in the month of Muharram, have also been questioned by Shiite ulama, but Muslims should not confuse such acts with matters of theology.

"Minor practices which are questionable should not be confused with the theological and jurisprudential school of thought. Similarly there are many parallels between Southeast Asian Muslims and Shiites," said Alatas, a Sunni himself, adding that both sects could learn from each other.

Enlightened past

Alatas went on to say that Islamic authorities in the Malay world had once displayed more enlightenment in their response to different schools of thought, unlike the case at present where Islamic department officials in Malaysia had been busy imposing their limited understanding of the religion on the Muslim masses. An example he gave was that of Habib Alwi bin Thohir al-Haddad, who served as mufti of Johor in the 1930s, who bestowed the *ijazah* (teaching certificate) to a Shiite scholar of that time.

In his speech entitled "Accommodation - Not Antagonism", Prof Crow gave an overview of the current Middle East politics, linking it with the agenda of sectarian strife by regional US-backed Arab regimes.

He also said it was critical that Muslims objectively study their respective schools of thoughts' foundational myths.

He however lamented the so-called 'traditionalist' scholars' penchant to 'polemical hostility', hampering efforts towards convergence.

"In fact, the most significant movements toward convergence in the past were undertaken by Islamic thinkers and authorities more open to the reasoned tradition of rational inquiry with its nuanced complexity and critical multi-level discourse, than to dogmatic Traditionalist self-affirmation of monolithic simplicities fueling bitter polemic dispute," said Crow in his lengthy analysis.



'Footloose jihadists'

Dr Haidar (**left**) captured the audience's attention with his use of the phrase "footloose jihadists" in making his case against what he called was the global export of sectarian strife to Muslim countries.

"I don't know if some of these footloose jihadists have come to Sabah recently," he remarked, drawing chuckles from the floor.

Saying the issues in sectarianism are "much more complex than religious reasons", Haidar, a prominent philanthropist who owns one of Indonesia's largest publishing houses, urged Muslims to reject attempts by certain regimes to manipulate sectarian sentiments.

But he saw hope in overcoming sectarian hatred following gestures by leaders from both divides who have called for a 'ceasefire' of condemnatory statements. They include Iranian leader Ayatullah Ali Khamenei and Iraq's Grand Ayatullah Sistani, who discourage inter-sect 'conversions' because Sunnis too love the 'Ahl al-Bayt', the title on Prophet Muhammad's family members, whose sayings form the core of Shiite Islam.

"These acts cannot be simply dismissed as *taqiyyah*," said Haidar, referring to the practice of concealing one's school of thought.