



Islam and the West

When religions talk

KUALA LUMPUR AND SHARM EL-SHEIKH

Religious leaders, scholars and business people are meeting all over the world to argue about free speech and Islamic sensibilities. How much does this achieve?

DEBATES about Islam and the West can throw up unexpected tensions. Take the American and the Brit, successful young professionals who met recently at a seaside resort in Egypt. As it happens, both were devout Muslims who pray five times a day. But as they discovered, manifest piety, of the sort ubiquitous in poorer bits of Egypt, arouses instant suspicion in parts of the country where rich tourists and important Westerners need cocooning—even when those Westerners have come to attend the august deliberations on "Islam and the West" taking place nearby with the blessing of Egypt's government.

The young men's daily supplications were snooped on aggressively by the police and they found themselves longing for the freedom to bow down before God that is taken for granted in California and the English Midlands. Inter-faith encounters, it seems, are tricky enough when they take the form of careful speeches by heads of government and other movers and shakers; for ordinary people who simply want to say their prayers, things can be downright baffling.

That doesn't, and shouldn't, stop faiths from trying to talk to each other. Since Osama bin Laden launched the war he describes as the renewal of an ancient conflict between Islam and the "Crusaders and Jews", there have been many initiatives to head off global confrontations in-

volving religions and the cultures they have spawned. Al-Oaeda's war on the West is by no means the only religious or pseudo-religious dispute in the world. In India, militant Hindus are at odds with other faiths. Sri Lanka's Buddhist monks often support the battle with Tamil separatists. In Northern Ireland and the Balkans, conflict has raged ostensibly between different forms of Christianity.

Recently, however, most of the high-profile efforts to stave off "civilisational" war by talking about it have focused on Islam and the West—without ever answering the question of whether it is useful to treat Islam as a single block, or of whether the West is best defined as Christian, Judaeo-Christian or secular. Perhaps al-Oaeda's proclamation of a civilisational war has been, in part, self-fulfilling: millions of Muslims regard their faith as being in a state of confrontation, along many fronts, with the West. Some Westerners, including prominent and influential ones, return the compliment.

Gabfests galore

Lots to talk about, then. Plenty of people, from theology professors to international-relations wonks, perpetually available to provide services as talkers. And no shortage of business leaders and politicians with an interest in avoiding a complete breakdown in relations between Islam

and the West who are the natural supporters of "inter-faith" initiatives. They are often to be found in wealthy and pro-Western Muslim lands such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, and Malaysia.

One such effort is the "Council of 100 leaders", an eclectic group of bishops, rabbis, imams, professors and others established as an adjunct to the World Economic Forum, a Swiss-based organisation. After the attacks of September 11th 2001, it became clear that the forum's stated purpose of "improving the state of the world" would be difficult to achieve without some acknowledgement that religion mattered.

Another effort to bring Islam and the West closer is the "Alliance of Civilisations", established in 2005 under the United Nations at the urging of Spain and Turkey. Yet another is the Cordoba Initiative (named after the multi-faith world of medieval Andalusia), chaired by Imam Feisal Rauf of New York, a well-connected figure in American Islam. That body and the Malaysian government co-managed a conference on the Muslim world and the West in Kuala Lumpur this week.

All these organisations deal as much with geopolitics and public policy as they do with religion. But there is purely theological dialogue, too. One of the most sophisticated, so far, is the "Common Word", a letter sent last October to Christian leaders by 138 Muslim scholars.

On a note of gentle provocation, it asked whether the commandments of Jesus to love God and one another could be a basis for conversation between the two largest monotheistic faiths. That initiative was started by the royal house of Jordan, a dynasty that traces its descent to Muhammad yet enjoys close ties to the West. Jordan's royals have also been busy trying to

reconcile different branches of Islam, bringing together Sunni and Shia scholars and nudging them to acknowledge one another as fellow Muslims (and hence isolate the ultra-militant types who dismiss as "infidels" any co-religionists with ideas more emollient than their own).

This month, the Saudi royal family also waded into the field, rather to the surprise of Muslim intellectuals in other parts of the world who are exasperated by the narrowness of Saudi theology and embarrassed by the kingdom's total intolerance of other religions. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah summoned to Mecca some 500 Sunni and Shia scholars for an intra-Muslim debate which was billed as a prelude to a broader discussion between Christians, Muslims and Jews (which will presumably not take place in Mecca, since non-Muslims may not go there).

Almost all such gatherings (and the recent ones in Malaysia and Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt were no exception) reach the noble conclusion that relations between the world's major faiths, and the countries where they predominate, should not be poisoned by "stereotypes" or "misperceptions" or "prejudice"—and that more effort to combat these dangers should be made in schools, universities, the media and everywhere else. Speakers in that religious figures might usefully work together on everything from business ethics to global warming.

Elephants in the room

And at almost all these gatherings, there are some huge subjects that participants either do or don't mention, depending on the location, sponsors and audience. One is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which hovers in the atmosphere of every discussion involving Jews and Muslims, even when they are ostensibly comparing notes about Abraham, Noah and Moses.

Another is the rise within the Muslim world of various forms of what Olivier Roy, a French scholar, calls "neo-fundamentalism" (often ascribed to a mixture of Egyptian zeal and Saudi petrodollars) which are crowding out local, more compromising readings of Islam in places ranging from the Balkans to south Asia. And of course, lurking in everyone's mind is the question of how much influence reasonable men of the faith have on their unreasonable brothers.

As well as repeating certain familiar commonplaces and negotiating certain familiar taboos, participants in inter-faith gatherings do sometimes run into real questions, that make a difference to the world at large. One such is how, if at all, freedom of speech can be reconciled with the Muslim demand for a ban on public statements or cultural products that offend Islamic sensibilities. At this week's meeting in Malaysia, that question was ad-

ressed in a way that frightened the relatively few participants whose understanding of civil rights was rooted in a Western, liberal world-view.

Speaker after speaker called for some formal, internationally agreed restriction on the defamation of religion. "I can never accept that freedom of speech is morally right when it offends my faith," said Prince Turki al-Faisal, a senior Saudi official (and former head of his country's intelligence service). Several participants said there should be a legal regime to uphold an article in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (a UN treaty that came into force in 1976) which states that "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law."

Put like that, the proposition sounds reasonable. But it can easily turn into a censor's charter. In Britain, for example, a new law outlawing "religious hatred" would have made it impossible—at least in its early version—to express strong disagreement with the tenets of any faith. Western civil libertarians are extremely nervous of any national law, let alone international regime, that formally restricts free speech on religious matters.

Fuelling all such discussion is the unavoidable fact that in an age of instant communications, offences to Muslim sensitivity, such as the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper, can easily trigger a global chain reaction, causing everything from murderous riots in Pakistan to a collapse of European exports to Muslim countries. Adding further to the tension—and an element of this week's debates in Kuala Lumpur—is the increasingly well-co-ordinated campaign by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to redefine human rights in a way that explicitly outlaws the

defamation of religion.

But in the midst of a tetchy discussion, one voice did defend the Western understanding of democracy and civil liberty, and indeed the compatibility of those principles with the devout practice of Islam. It came not from any of the government officials present (including those from Britain, France, Spain and Australia) but from a young Dutch Muslim lawyer.

Fatma v Fitna

Fatma Arslan explained to a roomful of mostly male dignitaries that there might be better ways of defending Islam in the West than trying to impose in Western countries the curbs on free speech that exist in most Muslim lands. She described how she and her friends used the avenues offered by Dutch democracy to express their objections to an anti-Muslim film, "Fitna", made recently by a member of parliament, Geert Wilders.

Through sermons in every Dutch mosque, plus public meetings and educational events, she reported it was emphasised again and again that democracy gave people the chance to argue in favour of Islam, as well as against it. People were urged not to play into the hands of anti-Muslim extremists by reacting in a violent or intemperate way. And in part because of these efforts, the sort of Christian-Muslim violence that has erupted several times in recent Dutch history was avoided.

"It's a great time to be a European Muslim," insisted Ms Arslan, who was born in Diyarbakir in eastern Turkey but clearly relishes everything that her adopted homeland has given her: the freedom to cover her head and to pray wherever and in whatever way her conscience impels her, with no interference from the police. If there is a problem between Islam and the West, people like her are surely part of the answer. ■



The highway to Mecca. Sometimes, religions find it hard to connect