

Keynote Address of the Conference

Peace and Harmonious Coexistence: An Islamic-Buddhist Dialogue

Y.B. Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Joseph Kurup

DISTINGUISHED guest, ladies and gentlemen, Salam 1Malaysia and good afternoon. It gives me great pleasure and honour to be here with you all today.

I would like to congratulate the organisers Soka Gakkai Malaysia (SGM), the Institute of Oriental Philosophy (IOP), Japan and Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya (UMCCD), with the support of Department of National Unity and Integration in Malaysia (JPNIN) for holding this significant event today.

I am proud to be here to witness this wonderful exchange, a dialogue between Islam and Buddhism on the theme “Peace and Harmonious Coexistence,” in conjunction with the Lotus Sutra Exhibition.

Flight MH370

Before going into the content of my speech today, it has now been more than one month since “Alright, goodnight”—the last words heard from flight MH370. Although traumatized by the event of a missing plane the nation has moved from what was perceived as a nation divided for various reasons to a nation who came together in prayers. An Australian paper reported last month that “interfaith ceremony would have been inconceivable 11 days ago in the country of 28 million people where religious differences and bigotry have often been on open display. For Malaysians the sight of non-Muslims bowing respectfully as Imam Hilman Nordin said prayers from the rostrum were an incredible step toward unity.”

It is just beautiful to see a Muslim, a Christian, a Hindu and a Buddhist praying next to each other, praying for the safe return of every single passenger especially the 2 babies onboard MH370 regardless of their religion, country of origin or their skin colour. These interfaith or multi-faith prayers are manifestation of the kind of unity that we need to move forward together, as one nation. For your information, in my

speech during the emergency motion on MH370 tabled in the Parliament last month, I suggested that March 8 to be made as a “national prayers day” in remembrance of MH370.

Remembering MH370 is about what said by the R&B recording artiste and singer Reshmonu when he launched his project #UniteForMH370. I agree when he said that #UniteForMH370, “will capture the fundamental characteristics that unite us as one family, and as one people....bringing together people from all walks of life, religions and ethnicities, as it transcends the normally visible boundaries that we construct to divide ourselves from one another, and come together for a worthy cause. For one night, we forget our divisions and stand united for...faith, compassion and love.”

A Cabinet Paper to make March 8 as a day of national prayers will be put forward soon for the consideration of the Government.

Belief in God

Distinguished guest, ladies and gentlemen,
Today religious differences are perceived as the most profound source of division among our people.

Swami Vivekananda in his opening address to the World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago, USA, September 11, 1893 said and I quote, “sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced that it is now.”

Prime Minister Dato Seri Najib Tun Razak at the Oxford Islamic Centre said in 2011 and I quote, “Our choice is clear. Come together in action for a future of justice, freedom, hope, compassion and goodwill for our children or it will be replaced by a future of injustice, tyranny, hopelessness, cruelty and hate.” So what is clear is that religion is not the problem. It is intolerance, religious bigotry and prejudice that we must stand up to. In short, we need put a stop to spiritual arrogance.

Brothers and sisters, our Rukun Negara (Malaysia’s national philosophy) puts the principle of belief in God at the highest place which makes religion as an anchor to our nation’s well-being and to our unity. Therefore, it is essential for us to understand each other’s religion. We should take time to explain our religion to others, and ask others questions about their religion. It is important to note that in order to create a sustainable society a key focus should be on religious dialogues.

Hence, dialogues such as one organised by your organisations today are our hope to create a peaceful and sustainable society. This is because at the heart of all religions is a belief for the sanctity of moderation. The values of moderation such as tolerance and respect are inherent in all religious faiths and creeds.

All great religions of the world share common perspective on respecting human dignity, on what is right and wrong, and what is fair and just. Moderation, tolerance and respect are values practiced among Malaysians which are essential to the preservation of our unity and a necessity if we are going to get along. We will never erase racial and religious bigotry due to human nature, but there is what we can do, what we must do. If we—people of all faiths—work together, we can suppress the intolerance and bigotry faced by people of all faith in any nation and in any society. In a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-lingual society like ours, I strongly believe one of the mechanisms to suppress intolerance and religious bigotry is through noble efforts such as dialogue between Islam and Buddhism today.

The Importance of Dialogues

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A scholar once remarked, “Dialogue between religions is absolutely necessary to enable religions to see themselves from others’ perspectives. Religious dialogue promotes a healthy examination of one’s own beliefs, and makes it easier to work together for peace and justice.”

Meanwhile, “His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, a great advocate of interfaith dialogue, even goes as far as to say that it is better for people to find what is best in their own religions than to convert to Buddhism.” We can all agree that this dialogue has a very noble intention and one of the most pressing needs of our time. It is indeed timely for such dialogue to be taking place in our multi-religious and multi-cultural society today.

Malaysia is a perfect venue for such dialogues to be held. Why do I say so? It is my belief that as Malaysians, we should be reaping the benefits from the diverse long standing tradition and cultures of our society because they represent the wisdom of our shared humanity. We seemed to coexist very well as compared to many parts of the world. It is imperative that this dialogue takes place for it is likely to generate mutual understanding and respect between the followers of any religion.

An Extraordinary Avenue to Generate Understanding and Tolerance

Distinguished guest, ladies and gentlemen,
But my brothers and sisters, we should never use these valuable dialogues, for preaching, for showing off or for proselytism. And we must not come to these dialogues in order to represent only ourselves, our own positions of narrow interests, our fanaticism, or our ideologies.

At this juncture I would like to quote Pope Francis, he said, “This is why interreligious dialogue and evangelization are not mutually exclusive, but rather nourish one another. We do not impose anything, we do not employ any subtle strategies for attracting believers, rather, we bear witness to what we believe and who we are with joy and simplicity.....Constructive dialogue between persons of different religious traditions helps also to overcome another fear, which we unfortunately increasingly see in strongly secularized societies.”

These dialogues can be an extraordinary avenue to generate understanding and tolerance if it is focused around morality, ethics and values rather than about complex theological questions. The dialogues should be frank and sincere with great mutual respect. These dialogues are opportunity for open conversations that not only will strengthen our bond but will also transform us for the better of our communities. These dialogues should always be about common good for the greater good of our communities.

Greater and common goods are about the collective needs of the communities rather than about individuals and these dialogues are also not serve your own or your groups’ narrow interest, at the expense of other people and groups. The dialogue today may be seen as one small step but surely and steadily as the Law of Physics (Universe) assures, ‘with every action there is a reaction,’ the labour of this small step will come into fruition one day.

Religious Dialogues to Reach the Grassroots of our Communities

Distinguished guest, ladies and gentlemen,
Although I am happy to say that since the second half of 2013, organised dialogues such as this have proliferated at the local and national levels but sadly the composition of participants seem to be the same. I think we need to find ways to simplify these dialogues to reach the masses so the core objective of these dialogues which is to promote

understandings among people of different faith could be achieved. The pragmatic need for better understanding and cooperation among people of different faith is only achievable if we can find ways to make these religious dialogues to reach the grassroots of our communities. Maybe it is high time for us to train people to conduct interreligious dialogue, to not only make these dialogues accessible to the public but also to share every religions' universal value on a wider platform.

Conclusion

Distinguished guest, ladies and gentlemen,
Finally, I would like to congratulate all of you for spending your valuable weekend here today. May you have an enjoyable and enlightening day ahead. I would like to leave you all with a thought provoking quote.

To paraphrase a 17th century religious-freedom advocate—Roger Williams that, “when you are at the helm-after being so long in the hatches—don’t forget what it was like to be in the hatches.” “After all, the right we guard for others today may be the right we need for ourselves tomorrow.”

Thank you.....have a good and constructive deliberation.