Malaysian model: A different kind of Islamic state

by S. Mark Heim in the October 5, 2004 issue

Delegates to the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission meeting in Kuala Lumpur in August had the novel experience of seeing their sessions covered in the Malaysian media with the intensity that normally attends national elections or the latest developments in the "Malaysian Idol" competition. Malaysian Christians enjoyed this unprecedented public attention given to their church life. The government and most media celebrated the event—the first major WCC meeting ever held in a Muslim country—as testimony to the country's diversity and harmony.

As the world goes, Malaysia is an undeniable and unusual example of multicultural success. The country's Muslims, who are of Malay origin, constitute 55 to 60 percent of the population. Some 25 percent are of Chinese origin and another 10 percent are of Indian origin. Christians constitute 7 percent of the population, and there are significant Hindu and Buddhist communities. Malaysia holds a rare place as an Islamic country viewed with hope by many Muslims as well as many non-Muslims around the world. The government has firmly opposed Islamic extremists—though reportedly some extremist groups, including al-Qaeda, have used the country as a staging ground for attacks carried out elsewhere.

In the streets of Kuala Lumpur, Western tourists and business people mingle with many young vacationing Saudi couples, typically a man in T-shirt and blue jeans and a woman enveloped in black save for her eyes. Our acquaintances frequently took pains to explain that this extreme of Muslim dress typically marked foreigners, whereas the dress of Malaysian women runs a gamut from discreet but relaxed to actively fashionable.

Malaysians of various backgrounds extolled the country's harmony and endorsed its basic social contract. This sentiment did not exclude awareness of real problems, one of which is the condition and status of large numbers of foreign workers (half of them illegal) from Indonesia, the Philippines and India.

The positive outlook appears to be rooted in two factors. The first is a lively lack of complacency. Malaysians look around and know that the peace they enjoy is fragile. At independence in 1957, many predicted racial or religious civil war for the country, and a communist insurgency was put down only after a major struggle. The second factor is the Malaysian economic miracle. As one of the Asian “tigers” alongside Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, Malaysia has seen development lift all ethnic boats. And everyone understands that ethnic conflict could reverse that reality, driving off the foreign investment, tourism and multinational corporations that have been carefully courted.

On the current world stage Malaysia looms larger than its size, as an example of an authentically Muslim state that is also religiously and culturally diverse, economically successful, educationally advanced, democratically governed and politically moderate. Currently chairing both the nonaligned movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Malaysia prides itself as a country forging an Islamic model very different from that in Saudi Arabia or Iran. It is hard to imagine those countries allowing, much less welcoming, a meeting of the World Council of Churches. According to some definitions of Islam (within the Islamic tradition or outside it), Malaysia is a country that ought not to exist. Its robust reality is a hopeful sign.

This is not to downplay the often difficult situation of non-Muslim religious minorities. Nor is it to deny that some among them sense a steady pressure toward the greater Islamicization of a society that a Western observer would already regard as lacking certain fundamental religious liberties. A man who marries a Muslim woman must adopt Islam. Proselytism of Muslims is forbidden by law, and what might count as such proselytism is in principle quite broad. On many points, decisions of Islamic religious courts have the force of national law (a touchy issue when a dispute involves a Muslim and a non-Muslim, or when one spouse in an existing marriage converts to Islam and makes the other members of the family subject to Shari‘a determinations on matters such as child custody).

In a very interesting way, Malaysian governmental practice has integrated some features of the traditional *dhimmi* status prescribed for non-Muslims in a Muslim state by using the quota structure of an affirmative-action regime. Everyone has an ethnic identity (which highly correlates with religious identity) stamped on his or her passport, and a positive discrimination policy reserves quotas of government jobs and university places for Malays.

On the other hand, non-Malay citizens are free to maintain their own private institutions (Chinese schools using the Chinese language, for instance) and many do. The result is a society without full formal equality of individuals before secular law, but with strong community institutions, a robust economy and interlocking patronage structures.

The Malaysian prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, took the dramatic step of making a formal visit and address to the Faith and Order Commission, staying afterwards for a luncheon with its officers. This visit was front-page news everywhere in the country, and many papers published the text of his talk. His address hailed the group's presence in Malaysia as an important act of dialogue between Christianity and Islam, in a context of deteriorating relations that he bluntly said left many Muslims convinced that the "Christian West is once again at war with the Muslim world." And he charged that "the reluctance of the West to recognize and address root causes of terrorism seems to confirm the view that Muslim grievances are not important," with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the prime example.

But the dominant point of Abdullah's talk was the necessity of dialogue, and above all the necessity for those in all faiths to promote moderation in their traditions. He said: "Many people practice their faith in absolutist terms. . . . They refuse to take into account 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 tenth century or 21st century, you must live according to the literal teachings of your religion." This rebuke clearly if implicitly targeted Islamic radicalism, along with those of other stripes.

Abdullah's predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad, was well known for his stinging critiques of the West and for a famous anti-Semitism-laced speech delivered at an Islamic summit conference in 2003. That talk merits close attention. It is sobering in its sense of grievance ("We are all Muslims. We are all oppressed. We are all being humiliated") against "Europeans and Jews." It is sobering in its martial imagery. Its most quoted portion in reference to the Jews runs as follows: "We are up against a people who think. They survived 2,000 years of pogroms not by hitting back, but by thinking. They invented and successfully promoted socialism, communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong, so they may enjoy equal rights with others. With these, they have now gained control of the

most powerful countries and they, this tiny community, have become a world power. We cannot fight them through brawn alone. We must use our brains also."

While Mahathir played on some of the most unsavory notes in contemporary Islamic culture, few commentators at the time noted that he struck those notes in service of doctrinal moderation, in the call for a progressive and reformed Islam, one less captive to narrow traditionalism and more open to science and philosophy. The speech was a brutally frank assessment of the state of Muslim societies as weak, divided and ineffective, with the proof being that "over the past 50 years of fighting in Palestine we have not achieved any result. We have in fact worsened our situation."

Though Mahathir presumed that non-Muslims are on every side seeking to subjugate and humiliate the Muslim community, he argued that the true root of its weakness was internal. It stemmed from a fateful turning point that came at the height of medieval Islamic civilization, with the advent of "new interpreters of Islam who taught that acquisition of knowledge by Muslims meant only the study of Islamic theology. The study of science and technology was discouraged. Intellectually the Muslims began to regress." This is Mahathir's view of a "fall" of Islamic tradition into the hands of literalists and dogmatic traditionalists.

Although his speech may share the rhetoric of Islamic extremists, it is completely at odds with the schools of law favored by the Taliban or Wahabism. Only an Islam open to new learning and contextual interpretation can embrace science and technology and so defeat its Jewish and Western enemies. This may not be quite how most Westerners frame progressive Islam, but Mahathir's analysis received a standing ovation from the representatives of Islamic states and attracted much support. It reflects something important about Malaysia's role in the Muslim world.

The current prime minister is a different personality, much less given to Mahathir's confrontational idiom. But there is unbroken continuity in the government's commitment to reform of the tradition. Near Kuala Lumpur the government has built a new International Islamic University, a truly impressive complex with students from all over the Islamic world (many subsidized), sparing no expense to build state-of-the-art programs in areas like electrical engineering and mathematics, as well as in Islamic studies. The religion faculty (many with degrees from top-flight Western universities) combines an inflexible affirmation of the perfection of Qur'anic revelation (and solidarity with global Muslim political grievances) with a very

sophisticated interpretive attempt to moderate any aspect of the tradition that stands in the way of economic and technological advance. The university thus offers the world Muslim community assurance of its Islamic purity at the same time that it promises a new era of development.

The newspapers that reported on the WCC meeting were also discussing “Islam Hadhari”(roughly translated as “civilizational Islam”), the phrase the government has given to its vision of a modernized faith. The prime minister’s office is soon to release its first official document outlining this approach, which will be used, among other things, for instructing and directing Shari‘a judges in the country, encouraging less traditionalist rulings in some areas.

Just two days after appearing before the World Council meeting, Prime Minister Abdullah gave a keynote address at the General Assembly of the Islamic Da’wah Council of Southeast Asia (“Da’wah” is a rough equivalent of the Christian idea of “mission”). To that audience, he made the same strong plea for moderation, going so far as to indicate a need for new and evolving *fatwas* (legal edicts) to guide Muslims in new situations. What this means in practice is far short of what American Christians might understand as liberal interpretation, for there is no question of considering the Qur’an itself or the model of the Prophet as in any way corrigible. Flexibility is sought in reference to the established deposit of subsequent law and interpretation. The “Islam Hadhari” initiative is being strongly opposed by the most conservative Islamic parties, which regard it as the institution of a new school of law and a departure from Islam. It is regarded with suspicion by some religious minorities who fear it is the umbrella for a more thorough imposition of Islamic norms on all citizens.

Over the days that Faith and Order delegates debated and discussed the many causes of Christian division, they also pondered the promises and tensions of the religious pluralism around them. The people of Malaysia clearly have cultivated a mutual forbearance and harmony capable so far of gentling conditions that elsewhere have speedily degenerated into conflict and violence. Just as clearly, the country is a precious historical experiment. In the post 9/11 world, the future course of that experiment is a matter of global concern. The World Council of Churches representatives grappled with the faces of the Christianity to come in this new millennium, aware that just as much is at stake in the faces of Islam to come, and in the relations that can be forged between the two religions. Well acquainted with the diversity and contradictions in the Christian world, they left with a broader, and

ultimately more hopeful, view of the options in the Muslim world.

Before we left Kuala Lumpur my wife and I visited the Islamic Arts Museum of Malaysia, a stunning new building that exhibits a range of exquisite historical objects, scientific as well as artistic. The glories of past Islamic civilization, so pointedly evoked by the prior prime minister, were on abundant display. Almost as interesting was the museum shop, where beautiful reproductions shared space with works of fervent Islamic devotion for all ages and numerous books attacking the theory of evolution. It was as if one had toured the Metropolitan Museum of Art and then browsed through its offerings of Sunday school curricula and creation science booklets.

Malaysia is a country rich in such juxtapositions, sometimes jarring to sensibilities formed in other cultures. The juxtapositions suggest that historical processes rarely repeat themselves identically and that our familiar constellations of ideas and movements are not fixed. They are subject to reformulation. What is under way in Malaysia is one possible future for Islam. And with that Islamic future Christianity may, God willing, have a fruitful and a peaceful appointment.