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Talk is crucial to unity

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As the borderless world creates more diverse societies around the globe, inter-faith dialogues are becoming an important device in many countries for reconciling their religious, cultural and social differences.

"I AM Catalan and Barcelona is my (football) team!" Umair Dar, 24, gushes. With his dark looks and Latin lilt, Umair looks like any other Spanish student.

It is only when he talks about his beliefs that one realises he is perhaps not such a typical Spaniard.

"I love university but I don't like to go clubbing with my friends because I don't drink or believe in mixing freely with the opposite sex. When I want to marry, my mother will find me a suitable girl," he shares frankly.

Umair is one of the estimated 1.5 million Muslims in Spain. Born in Pakistan to a Kashmiri family, he was 15 when his family moved to Spain. Currently, he works as a mediator, translator and interpreter for the Barcelona City Council, mainly to help newcomers, especially Muslim migrants, settle in the city.



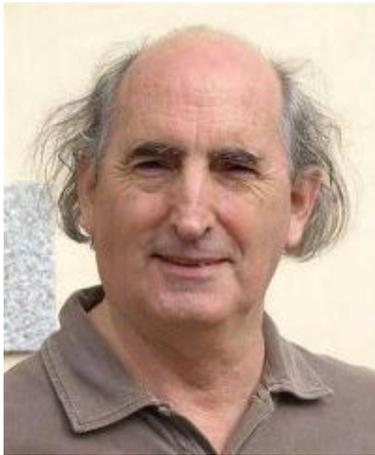
Fostering inter-faith ties: The Harmony Centre at the An-Nahdhah Mosque in Singapore was not motivated by any religious conflict but was set up to portray how progressive Islam is.

When asked about problems as a Muslim living in the majority Roman Catholic country, Umair only shrugs.

“I cannot deny that sometimes there are issues but we are largely accepted as part of the society,” he says.

Like many other European countries, Spain is grappling with the issue of its diverse immigrant communities. However, unlike most of its neighbours, Spain has a rich diverse heritage that it can draw lessons from.

“There are currently 192 nationalities living in Spain. However, there is a general feeling among ordinary Spanish that they should be welcoming to anyone who wants to live here,” shares Dr Justo Lacunza Balda, an ordained priest with the Society of Missionaries of Africa.



Dr Balda: ‘Inter-faith dialogue is not an option but a vital necessity in today’s world’

“Many want to feel compassion for those who have travelled miles to find work to support their family, or ran away from famine, war and conflict.”

What helps most, adds Dr Balda, is his countrymen’s understanding that to live together in peace side by side, they have to accept the richness of their diversity and pluralism as well as cooperate with each other.

“Of course, this is largely due to our mixed historical heritage,” he points out.

Probably the biggest historical example of religious pluralism in the world, Spain, which was under Islamic rule from the 8th to 15th Century, saw people of the three monotheistic religions – Muslims, Christians and Jews – living peacefully side-by-side for centuries. Although the Christians and Jews lived under some restriction, the co-existence of the three groups created a rich, cultural heritage in the Iberian peninsula.

Traces of Islamic influence can still be seen in many facets of Spanish life, making it easier for Spain to cope with its modern-day diversity, says Dr Balda, “We can see it in the art, architecture, music, in thought, science, philosophy and in our language and writing.”

Still, the situation became slightly complicated a few years ago, he admits.

“The 2004 terrorist bombing in the central railway station of Madrid which killed some 192 people and injured hundreds of others created a new mistrust between the Spanish Catholics and Muslims,” he tells.

The Spanish government, however, spared no effort to create public awareness on how they need to embrace the country's diversity. This was achieved through inter-faith dialogues, which was conducted with the cooperation of the different religious groups.

The biggest lesson they learnt, Dr Balda points out, is that knowledge and dialogues are important if you want to foster better understanding between different communities.



Clear objective: Visitors participating in an inter-faith activity at the Harmony Centre which aims to share what Islam is all about with non-Muslims

Hence, it seems almost pre-ordained that Madrid should host the Sixth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Inter-faith Dialogue titled “Consolidating religious freedom and mutual understanding through inter-

faith and inter-cultural dialogue” early this month.

Attended by some 120 delegates from 27 of around 50 countries that make up ASEM, the inter-faith dialogue was aimed at promoting relations and mutual respect between cultures and creeds from both regions.

The working sessions, held at the IFEMA exhibition centre in Madrid, dealt with three main issues: religious freedom and human rights; respect and mutual understanding; and dialogue between cultures and religions as a bridge between societies.

The ASEM meeting, which was set up in 1996, is a high-level forum between the governments of both regions. The Asia-Europe Inter-faith Dialogue has taken place every year since 2005, either in Asia or in Europe, and brings together diplomats, senior officials connected with inter-faith matters, leading academics and religious leaders from different faiths.

Dr Balda, who was one of the keynote speakers, could not stress more how important inter-faith dialogue is in the new world order.

“Inter-faith dialogue is not an option but a vital necessity in today’s world and a powerful tool for creating conditions that lead to conflict resolution in communities, societies and nation-states,” he says.

He feels that Malaysia’s situation is reminiscent of Spain’s Islamic Age.

“It is impossible to think of Malaysia without thinking of the three major groups – culturally, linguistically and ethnically they are different but together they are terrific.

I believe that if Malaysia can find the common ground; by seeking unity and not uniformity, it will become fantastic.”

There is much that Spain and Malaysia can learn from each other, he adds.

“Spain can learn a lot from Malaysia about how to find avenues for solutions to the problems that our religious differences create. What Malaysia can re-learn from Spain is the desire to emphasise how, even though we (the different religious communities) may be different, we are complementary,” he says.

Creating harmony

Italy is another country that is discovering the importance of inter-faith dialogue.

As its representative, Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry official Fabio Schina, tells the conference, the Italian government is realising the importance of inter-faith dialogue in fostering better relations between diverse communities not only domestically but also in the international arena.

“Historically, Italy is a monolithic Roman Catholic country but in recent years our demography has changed slightly due to the growth of immigration from different parts of the world. Although the majority of our population is still Catholic, we are seeing a rise in the number of people of other faiths such as Islam and Buddhism.”

He concedes that in Italy, for instance, there is still not enough knowledge on Islam.

“We tend to connect the word Islam only to Middle-East countries, not understanding that Islam is diverse too. This is where inter-faith dialogue plays an important role – to increase knowledge of other faiths and foster mutual understanding,” he says.

Schina adds that although Italy, like many European countries, holds the principle that religion is personal, their religious history has made them more open to the external dimension of faiths.

“For example, although we think that religion is a personal issue, we are able to accept the external signs or demonstrations of faith such as places of worship and personal religious identity like headscarves and turbans,” he stresses.

To promote better inter-faith understanding, the Italian government seeks the help of NGOs.

“There are many tools and ways to handle this – through laws, government policies and guidelines and the education system. Many NGOs and other organisations are already working in the field, so we choose to learn from them and collaborate with them on how to foster better inter-faith understanding as well to address the needs of each community and society at large. There is no national approach yet but I see that the awareness on the issue of interfaith relations is growing nationwide.”

Schina says that Italy also puts great emphasis on its process of dialogue with other countries. For one, he highlights, Italy has started talking to Indonesia to learn another dimension of Islam and multi-cultural co-existence.

“Even though at present we can find that our strategies may not be as effective as we had hoped, even if the outcome is not clear or not what we expect, we strongly believe that dialogue is the best tool at handling inter-faith issues.

“It is a long process but a process that we need to start and go through. Talking about the issues will lead to awareness and that will lead to better relations,” he says.

Closer to home is Singapore’s example. The republic houses one of the oldest inter-faith organisations in the world, the Inter Religious Organisation (IRO), which was established in 1949.

Comprising members from 10 major faiths including Zoroastrianism and the Baha’i faith, this inter-faith NGO has been active in organising inter-faith dialogues, exhibitions and resource materials for the public to promote greater understanding between religious communities in the country.

In 2006, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), a statutory board under the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), decided to play a more active role in promoting greater understanding of Islam in the multicultural republic by consolidating and centralising all its inter-faith and community engagement programmes under one roof.

The centre is aptly called the Harmony Centre, and is housed within the premises of a mosque, the An-Nahdhah Mosque.

As Harmony Centre head, Ustaz Mohamed Ali Atan explains, being a multi-cultural and multi-religious country, Muis wanted to be proactive in fostering better inter-faith relations.

“We wanted to be proactive and not reactive, so the setting up of the Harmony Centre was not motivated by any religious conflict. We wanted to introduce what Islam is to non-Muslims and portray how progressive Islam is. Some might say that it was reactionary to 2001 but we have been mulling the idea even before 2001.”

Mohamed Ali, who is also the chairperson of the An-Nahdhah Mosque, shares that since its inception, about 22,000 visitors have visited the centre.

“Religious organisations, schools, community organisations, community leaders and individuals form the majority of visitors. Being unique and a first of its kind in Singapore, it has also attracted many diplomats, foreign government officials and non-Government organisations to the centre,” he says, before admitting that they studied Malaysia’s religious centres as models before coming up with their innovative one-stop Islamic centre.

The most important aspect of the Harmony Centre, stresses Mohamed Ali, is its clear objectives.

“We are clear with our objectives to gain the confidence of non-Muslims. This is not a platform for converting non-Muslims or for teaching religious classes to Muslims. We want to share what Islam is all about with the non-Muslims and not only promote better understanding of Islam but also promote inter-faith dialogue and engagement at all levels,” he says.

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