

## Dealing with the prejudices towards Islam

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WHILE the media is awash with statements relating to the naively titled Bar Council public forum, another forum held at about the same time is fast falling into oblivion.

Many seem to be more preoccupied with the former rather than spending their energy building on the successes accrued from the latter. The two-day forum, organised by the National Unity and Integration Department, came up with 10 recommendations ("Positive start to religious dialogue"—*New Sunday Times*, Aug 10).

Although the spokesman of the forum admitted that the participants were burdened by stereotyped images of each other, many points were in fact raised, explained and clarified on a heart-to-heart basis.

"They proved themselves wrong and they showed that they were mature and strong enough to listen."

Without doubt, this dialogue was far more successful in creating understanding among the participants representing different beliefs. Perhaps being mature and adequately strong had something to do with it. By challenging the stereotypes that have been taken for granted all these years, one sees the light at the end of the tunnel.

A few days prior to that was an international forum co-organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Isis), where we were informed by John Esposito, a renowned professor of religion and international affairs at Georgetown University, as well as the director of the centre for Muslim-Christian understanding at the university, that Islam is poised to be the second largest religion in the US.

It is even more perplexing, given all the negative stereotyping linking Islam to terrorism, to know that the number of Muslims in America is actually increasing, especially after the Sept 11 tragedy.

Despite the largely non-Muslim environment, apparently converting to Islam is not such a big deal after all. To some extent, many have managed to deal with the tired stereotypes heaped on Islam over the centuries.

Of course, not everyone is happy to see long-standing stereotypes being demolished. Esposito, for example, has been labelled a "as one of the foremost apologists for Islamism in recent years".

Whatever is meant by "Islamism", it is a deliberate attempt to discredit him and, more importantly, keep the existing stereotypes alive.

What is left unsaid is that militarily powerful nations are often the hidden hands that supply arms to those they now regard as promoters of "terrorism".

Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban are just random examples. While there are non-Muslim "terrorists" too, somehow Islam is always highlighted as the sole perpetrator of violence worldwide.

In fact, those who have dared to speak about Islam in favourable terms are often dealt with unkindly. Take for example the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, who was not spared when he suggested not too long ago that he believed the adoption of some syariah in Britain seemed "unavoidable".

Although the archbishop reckoned that by doing so it could help social cohesion, his critics accused him of failing to defend Christianity and called for his resignation.

In reality, however, the archbishop had made no proposal for syariah implementation and certainly had not called for its introduction as some kind of parallel jurisdiction to civil law. But the amount of fuss it created indicated how intractable the prejudices and stereotyping are when it comes to anything Islam.

Indeed, there are those who are made to feel "terrorised" when, in actual terms, the scope to be dealt with by syariah courts does not go beyond marital and financial matters so that Muslims can live by what they believe.

Moreover, it certainly isn't threatening or incompatible with English law which is said to recognise religious courts as a means of arbitration. After all, reportedly, apart from syariah courts, there are also Orthodox Jewish courts already in existence in Britain. Unfortunately, it is the former once again that are always stereotypically singled out.

Amid all this confusion, it is worthwhile to heed the archbishop when he said (*Telegraph*, Feb 8) that people need to look at Islamic law "with a clear eye and not imagine, either, that we know exactly what we mean by

syariah and just associate it with... Saudi Arabia, or whatever....

"I do not think we should instantly spring to the conclusion that the whole of that world of jurisprudence and practice is somehow monstrously incompatible with human rights just because it doesn't immediately fit with how we understand it," he said, implying we need to get rid of the stereotypes that have been haunting us.

If only we care to ponder the benefits of such profound and insightful thoughts, we would have certainly increased our level of maturity in an attempt to deal with our own stereotypes before dealing with that of others.

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