

COMMENT

Muslims should take pride in Islamic greetings

PEACE BE UPON YOU:

The significance and meaning of 'salam' are incomparable to Western greetings

IN a June 1999 interview, British writer and Nobel laureate Doris Lessing (1919 to 2013) reminisced about a Shanghai visit during which she had this experience: "One evening, I heard a Chinese family singing *Happy Birthday*. It was weird. You would have thought that they'd have their own happy birthday song. Every dominant society in the world — whether it's French or British or American — imposes its culture on less-developed societies."

Lessing does not like the idea that Chinese people borrow the Western *Happy Birthday* song to commemorate birth anniversaries. She expects them to have their own

songs for such occasions. Every culture has its distinctive way of celebrating special days, and Lessing believes that people should preserve and revive their cultural expressions of special purposes. Based on this observation, what follows is a commentary on modes of greetings in vogue among people, especially Muslims, in Malaysia.

Every community has various types of interpersonal and social communication, such as jokes, greetings and other exchanges between friends, acquaintances, family members and people. All races in Malaysia have their modes of greeting, which, if preserved, can augment the beauty of its diversity. This is one way how the racial mosaic of the country can enrich its multicultural practices.

However, Western expressions seem to dominate and supercede indigenous or religious words of greeting. It is true that the globalised English language has given Malaysians common vocabularies and phrases of greeting. So, when interacting with people of other races and religions, Western expressions may bridge the gaps.

However, in the case of intra-racial or intra-religious communication, there should be a strong sense of identity and cultural affiliation. Hence, it may be advisable for people to use indigenous expressions when greeting members of their religious or cultural community. The preponderance of English or other European languages and the global reach of Western culture should not be allowed to undermine local articulations and expressions of greeting.

The dominance of Western idioms of greeting, especially in university campuses in Malaysia, is palpable. The ubiquity of Western greetings is a manifestation of a much wider project of colonial modernity and cultural imperialism. People of former colonies exhibit a wide variety of influences and behaviours in their lifestyle patterns, attitudes and activities. In such a cultural context, creating platforms of self-assertion and resistance by way of spreading



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Islamic greetings is important, especially for Muslims in Malaysia.

Muslims have a wonderful expression of greeting and parting.

However, it is sadly observed that many Malaysian Muslims have apparently abandoned it. They often use "hi", "bye", "good morning", "good afternoon", "good evening" and "good night", depending on the mode and time of familial or social encounters.

While Western expressions are, perhaps, useful when greeting people of other cultural and religious backgrounds, Muslims are religiously obligated to use *salam* (peace) when greeting other Muslims.

According to Abdullah ibn Salam, a companion of Prophet Muhammad, the first advice the latter gave to his followers upon his arrival in Medina from Mecca reads: "O people, feed the hungry, spread *Salam* (greeting of peace), maintain your kin rela-

tionships, and pray at night while others are asleep. With this, you shall enter Heaven in peace" (Al-Bukhari).

Moreover, it should also be remembered that *Salam* is also one of the names of God. So, the Islamic greeting of *salam* has added significance, and is perhaps much more meaningful than other expressions of social niceties.

Besides theological discussions, greeting with *Assalamualaikum* is priceless, given the fact that it has a wonderful meaning: peace be with you. Such a wish and expression of greeting is incomparable.

An imitative tendency is primarily the reason why many Muslims use Western expressions in preference to the Islamic *salam*.

This shows how the culture of mimicry can subtly remain regnant, even in a supposedly Muslim setting.

The secularly oriented people in Muslim societies, perhaps, have an added reason to shun *salam*. They tend to maintain a safe distance from religious teachings and rituals and a direct departure from religious traditions.

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COMMENT

'Goodbye' has religious roots, too

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However, "goodbye" or "bye" is prevalent among them and here, lies a problem, which I will explain below.

The use of "goodbye" or "bye" is an attempt on their part to maintain their secular outlook and religion-neutral character. But the fact of the matter is that "goodbye"

or "bye" is not a secular or religion-neutral term. "Goodbye" stands for the old Anglo-Saxon saying "God be with you" and is further shortened to "bye".

So, people who relinquish the Islamic *salam* and choose "goodbye" or "bye" do not necessarily become religion-neutral, rather, it reveals their ignorance of these terms, or prejudice against Islam.

In other words, such people apparently avoid the Islamic way of greeting only to adopt the Christian ones.

Perhaps, advocates of secularism in Muslim societies either do not know the origin of the expressions "goodbye" or "bye", or their scepticism and hostility is mainly against Islam, hence they switch from the Islamic *salam* to the

Christian greetings.

I do not think this secularist tendency applies to the vast majority of Malaysian Muslims who refrain from saying *salam*, and use ritualistic Western/Christian expressions for greetings and partings.

The primary reason for their use of Western expressions is ignorance and an imitative tendency that is part of a trend that

postcolonial theorists regard as Eurocentricism or cultural mimicry.

Muslims cannot subscribe to secularism or mimicry and should use *Assalamualaikum* in preference to alien expressions when greeting and parting from each other.

This is to show that they take pride in their cultural roots and religious identity.