Comment: Correcting misconceptions about Islam

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2010/12/05

ANDRE Gide, the famous French writer and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947, is reputed to have said that "Most quarrels amplify a misunderstanding". The notion that conflicts between people are often the result of initial misunderstanding and that the resultant quarrels accentuate problems rather than ameliorate them is an important insight into the nature of many disputes.

Recently Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak asserted the importance of addressing the problem of Islamophobia. In his speech, which according to the New Straits Times, was read by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom, Najib argued: "At a time when the Western media is playing the role of scrutinisers of Islam and are linking Muslims to terrorism, Islam should be approached in a simple manner to promote understanding and to alter misconceptions." (www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/04perk/Article#ixzz160YzgRWB). Of course, not all hostility is due to misunderstandings and misconceptions.

Some of it is also due to the expression of particular interests that seek advantage through the proliferation of ignorance and misrepresentation.

However, to the extent that error in people's understandings of Islam is based on misunderstandings rather than wilful misrepresentations, we must recognise the importance of addressing the issue educationally.

The problem becomes pedagogical and the way to address it is in part through the proper elaboration of understanding and knowledge. The old fashioned way of doing this is to provide those who would seek a better and more informed understanding with written literature on the topic.

Two books sit in front of me on my table in the study: the first book I want to mention in regard to this discussion is the work by Professor Muhammad Salleh Yaapar, titled Pilgrimage To The Orient (Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia 2009).

This book provides an interesting critique of post-modern thought in regard to literature and an eloquent defence and articulation of the value and insights into the "literary traditions and civilisations of Asia" (page xi). In this text, Muhammad Salleh provides the reader with an important rejoinder to the post-modern "hermeneutics of suspicion" (page 86) and introduces us to interesting discussions on "Islamic hermeneutics" (page 77) and the importance and salience of the "journey towards the meaning and spiritual reality of a particular literary text" (page 86).

He discusses with perceptiveness Islamic Cosmology and Literature, and provides us with a thoughtful and provocative discussion of the Relevance Of Literature To Life. His book includes interesting discussions on Play And Affirmation: Derrida And Nietzsche And The Challenge Of Deconstructive Thought as well as Feminism And Comparative Literature In The South East Asian Context.

This, as well as other interesting chapters, all add to the intellectual complexity of the work.

In essence, Pilgrimage To The Orient is an important contribution to reasserting the position and significance of literature to knowledge and truth.

His book is also an eloquent riposte to contemporary post-modern literary theories which seem to dominate present-day academia. Not only does the text provide perception in its discussion of literary theory, it also offers the reader an eloquent and measured discussion of how to read Islamic literature.
without the burdens of extreme "suspicion" and "doubt" that seem to characterise current Occidental approaches to literature.

The book is clearly written, well researched and provides a good introduction to both literary theory as well as Islamic hermeneutics, among other topics.


This book is a Festschrift for Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib and contains 22 essays from an international array of scholars, who through their discussion of his work, provide readers not simply with an erudite and informative introduction to the significance of his ideas and work but also more broadly provide them with an excellent and highly engaging introduction to Islam in philosophical, historical, cultural depth.

This Festschrift is an important work given the significance and critical centrality of Syed Muhammad Naquib's work to Islamic Philosophy, Islamic Education and Islamicization of Knowledge.

Some of the essays in the volume are intellectually eye-opening. For example, Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud's opening chapter on Al-Attas: A Real Reformer And Thinker sets the stage for the further 21 essays and provides a good biographical introduction to the subject.

Ernest Wolf-Gazo's Prolegomena To West And East: Kant And Ibn Khaldun was, for me, revealing. Omar Jah's Al-Balagh was stimulating. Mohamed Salleh's essay in this volume titled Sufism And Architectural Art In The Malay World is also fascinating. The essays, taken as a whole. are of an excellent standard and provide the reader with multiple avenues to engage the thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib. While I have mentioned four of the contributions in the volume. the reality is that it's impossible in the limited space of this column to discuss all of the contributions with any justice. In short, the volume is a credit both to its participants and to its publishers at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

It provides readers with an erudite and challenging engagement with the thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib and is an excellent resource for people who are interested in properly engaging the work of Malaysia's greatest living Islamic philospher. My hope in writing this column is that readers unaware of Syed Muhammad Naquib's work will search out this text and perhaps even engage with his important oeuvre.

For those of my readers who I have inspired, let me recommend to you Syed Muhammad Naquib's work Islam And Secularism, The Concept Of Education In Islam and Islam: The Concept Of Religion And The Foundation Of Ethics And Morality. I have found these works instructive and illuminating.

I began this column by engaging with the problem of misrepresentation with regard to Islam. My aim in bringing to my readers' attention the two books briefly discussed above is to suggest that the path to overcoming misunderstanding and falsity lies in taking seriously the arguments and viewpoints of important Malaysian Islamic scholars.

I began with a discussion of Muhammad Salleh's book Pilgrimage To The Orient and suggested that it is well worth reading for those who are genuinely interested in debates over literary theory and Islamic literature, among many other topics.

I concluded with an all too brief discussion of the Festschrift for Syed Muhammad Naquib. My argument in regard to this second book is that it represents a significant and critically important contribution to the
engagement and understanding of the ideas of Malaysia's greatest Islamic philosopher. Furthermore, the work represents a serious and informed engagement with Syed Muhammad Naquib's work, which is the mark of proper recognition and understanding.

When we talk about overcoming ignorance, misunderstanding and misrepresentation, it seems to me that we need to begin by taking seriously critical scholarship with regard to the object being misunderstood.

The problems of ignorance need to be addressed by the hard work of taking things gravely. If part of the problem with the way Islam is understood lies in misrepresentation, then what better way to address that than to be directed to read works that help illuminate?

One of the great quarrels of our contemporary world stems from a wrong recognition and misrepresentation of Islam. Addressing this requires engaging with ideas as well as respecting and recognising the works of important Malaysian intellectuals. The contribution that we can make by taking Islamic scholars and scholarship seriously is one way to help address the misconceptions and egregious argument of Islamophobes. The power of being directed to good reading should not be underestimated in this issue.

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