

Proponent of interfaith dialogue

PROFESSOR Syed Farid Alatas, 50, is head of the Malay studies department and associate professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore, where he has been since 1992.

The Malaysian national of Yemeni descent obtained his PhD in sociology from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 1991.

His books include *Alternative Discourse In Asian Social Science: Responses To Eurocentrism* (2006), and *An Islamic Perspective On The Commitment To Inter-Religious Dialogue* (2008).

He is a leading proponent of interfaith dialogue. Active in the Islamic arts, he often organises Sufi musical nights and dance performances for the public.

He is the eldest son of the late Malaysian scholar and politician Syed Hussein Alatas.

He is married to Madam Mojgan Shavarebi, 49, an Iranian who is a Persian-English interpreter. They have three children, aged 11 to 20.

THE ST INTERVIEW

Singapore is not yet truly multicultural



Prof Alatas notes that the "boring" interfaith interactions that he first encountered in the early 1990s have blossomed into genuine friendship between religious leaders. In the past decade, they have visited one another's places of worship and mourned deaths together. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Many cultures co-exist here, but NUS professor sees little genuine interest in one another



BY LEE SIEW HUA
SENIOR WRITER

THE journey of the Muslim faithful to Mecca is a rare symbol of two intertwined quests during Hari Raya Haji.

First, the pilgrimage or haj displays the unity of the Islamic brotherhood, with Muslims of every background praying in Mecca, equal in the eyes of Allah.

Then, just as profoundly, the haj is a hopeful interfaith moment for the world.

Professor Syed Farid Alatas pictures these yearnings of the human heart as he reflects on the significance of Hari Raya Haji, celebrated by Muslims on Sunday.

"The rich and poor, scholars and the lowly educated, politicians and entrepreneurs, black and white and every colour in between all gather in one location," says Prof Alatas, head of the Malay studies department at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

"It is probably the largest pilgrimage in the world," he says.

"It demonstrates the unity of humans because all the faithful who are there come from different backgrounds."

In parallel, a wider unity is at work because Muslims believe that aspects of the haj can be traced back to the Prophet Abraham, a patriarch revered by Muslims, Jews and Christians alike. He says this helps to "predispose Muslims towards inter-religious understanding".

"I know that many who have gone on the haj return with an increased conviction in inter-religious appreciation and harmony," adds Prof Alatas, who is also an associate professor of sociology at NUS.

Muslims, instrumental in the 1949 founding of the Inter-Religious Organisation, are active in interfaith matters.

Thankfully, the "boring" set of interfaith interactions that he first encountered in the early 1990s has blossomed.

"I notice there is genuine friendship now," says Prof Alatas, a leading proponent of interfaith dialogues.

He observes that religious leaders have visited one another's places of worship and homes over the past decade. They have mourned deaths in the family. They trust one another.

"This is very important. What it means is, if there is an event which might result in what people fear, a riot or racial incident, that's when you need religious leaders to calm their congregations."

Singapore has arrived at a stage where religious leaders can rely on one another to dispel myths, correct negative statements or cool tensions.

He feels there should not be anxiety that participating in dialogue dilutes the distinctiveness of a religion. "That's a gross misunderstanding of dialogue - that if you accept the rules and terms of dialogue, you have to dilute your faith."

He elaborates: "Dialogue can also be about differences. A Muslim and a Christian can debate and will never agree on the Trinity. But it's no harm. You do learn a lot from genuine dialogue, even about your own faith."

Interfaith scholars have commented that as Islam is a close cousin of the other two Abrahamic faiths, Christianity and Judaism, these are historical elements on which deeper dialogue can be built.

But sometimes that can be a problem, he suggests. "The way I look at it, each of these three siblings claims to know the father better," he quips. "And each claims the other two got it wrong."

While happy that religious leaders have achieved intimate, authentic friend-

ship in the last decade, he feels this has not percolated fully to the masses.

"To put it bluntly, the Malays are seen as a relatively underdeveloped community." There have been decades of writing since the 19th century, and also political or media discourse, that fault Islam as "a brake on development", he contends.

"Until today, many people associate Islam with Malay backwardness, and consequently see Islam as a backward religion," he says.

The idea that progress and integration could possibly come about if Malays are "less religious" persists in Singaporean thinking, he adds.

"I don't think it's a fading perception because the majority of non-Muslims don't know much about the Malay community and culture, and Islam."

In the West, he observes, university classes in Islamic culture and civilisation are popular with non-Muslims, as are Arabic, Persian or Turkish languages.

Prof Alatas also does not believe that Singapore is innately multicultural.

"We are not a multiculturalist society. We are multicultural in the sense that there are many cultures co-existing," he says.

"But our orientation is not founded on the idea of multiculturalism. There isn't a celebration of being multicultural or developing an admiration and interest in other cultures.

"Our education system does not breed multiculturalism. If it doesn't do that, how do we dispel myths?"

The Malays themselves have myths that the Chinese are "cold, calculating and money-minded", he adds.

Globally, there are myths and issues to resolve within the diverse Islamic world as well. The issue in Islamic reform, revival or resurgence is how best to appropriate from tradition, he says.

"The real challenge for Muslim society

is to decide what understanding of Islam they want to put into practice."

Is it more fundamentalist, or an enlightened multicultural spiritual understanding which feels very modern but is still rooted in tradition?

He points to Sufism, which he describes as traditional Islam encompassing the religion's foundational beliefs plus centuries of civilisation infused with art, poetry, music, and theological and metaphysical doctrine.

"When you are rooted in civilisation and the great traditions of Islam, including Sufism which is by nature open and pluralistic, you can't be influenced by extremist ideas."

Extremism is tougher to uproot today, however.

"While Muslims have always rejected extremist ideology, today it is harder to confine because of a number of factors, including oil wealth and support from superpowers like the British who supported the Wahhabi alliance between the wars," he says.

Wahhabism is the dominant sect in Saudi Arabia. It was founded by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1702-1791), who allied with the House of Saud.

Prof Alatas is not pessimistic, but he does perceive that extremism has become more difficult to deal with in modern times.

Within South-east Asia, he believes that a knowledge of great men of the region can build a fuller diversity in dialogue.

Students know little about the region, including Filipino thinker Jose Rizal, "probably the most creative South-east Asia has produced", he says. "In our bid to be global, we leapfrog the region."

In the unifying spirit of Hari Raya Haji, he says: "We want to be truly cosmopolitan."

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Tolerance 'is a bad word'

■ *Beyond tolerance, what will the new normal in race relations require?*
People in Singapore always talk about tolerance - but tolerance is a bad word. It's a grudging acceptance of the other.

Perhaps that's the problem in Singapore. We are polite people and we tolerate each other. But underlying the tolerance are irritation, lack of interest, certainly not admiration.

I mean, how many Chinese in Singapore have an interest in Malay culture, Islamic civilisation, its arts and poetry? And how many Malays have an interest in the achievements of Chinese civilisation?

Tolerance is not a good foundation for sustained peace and harmony.

What I have discovered is that the goal of dialogue between faiths is not to ignore the differences and just focus on the similarities.

The real challenge of dialogue is to accept and even discuss the differences, and to assert that in spite of the impossibility of reconciliation over these differences, it's still possible to have respect and admiration for the other and not simply tolerance.

■ *What are the underlying issues in Islamic reform or revival?*

The real issue for Muslims in Singapore is Islamic reform - what to appropriate from the Islamic tradition.

All Muslims will agree that if we practise Islam in the way it should be practised, which means going back to the values of the early Muslim community around the Prophet, it would be a good thing and Muslims will be able to overcome their underdevelopment. Where they disagree is how to do that.

You have a few who think you have to literally reconstruct the kind of society the Prophet lived in, which might involve dressing like him or rejecting technology. Most people don't accept that.

But you also have people with a narrow conception of how Islam should be lived today. It might involve a puritanical understanding of Islamic values and laws, for example, insisting on the death penalty for adultery, or claiming that many cultural practices are against the tenets of Islam.

■ *Why do you express concern about Eurocentrism, and what is its impediment to multiculturalism here?*

We are very parochial. We have exposure to Western literature and thinking, but how about African, Middle Eastern and Asian works? Rumi is a great Persian poet but hardly known to kids here. Teach him alongside Shakespeare.

We have for a long time been decolonised politically. There is such a thing as colonisation of the mind. It continues willingly, in academia and in general knowledge.

For example, where Malay studies is concerned, do we know what Singapore was like before the British arrived? The public perception is Eurocentric; people believe that nothing much happened before the British.

The recent work of historians and archaeologists shows that Singapore was an important commercial centre before Raffles. It was inhabited and multicultural, judging from artefacts. But for most Singaporeans, it's a blank.