

Poverty at the root of revival

Ungku Abdul Aziz has been Chancellor of the University of Malaya for the past 10 years. Last year he was created the country's only Royal Professor, the latest in a series of academic honours and awards from many parts of the world. But the achievement of which he is most proud is the creation of the Muslim Pilgrims Savings Corporation which embodies the Islamic prohibition against interest in a unique profit-sharing scheme which has now amassed 240 million Malaysian dollars and which allows some 5,000 Malaysian pilgrims to visit Mecca by air each year without putting themselves in debt or selling the family livestock. Ungku Aziz is an economist with a particular interest in rural development, but he is also a supporter of the arts, is working on the creation of an international university for the ASEAN countries, and is deeply involved in the application of Islamic principles to the modern world. Here he answers questions put to him by the Editor of *People*.

Interview

People: How would you describe the Muslim revival?

Ungku Aziz: There is a whole complex of revivals going on. Under the banner of Islam all sorts of people who are Muslims are experiencing a spirit of renaissance, some in a very antagonistic way, some in a very philosophical way, some in a very chauvinistic way. Therefore it is very difficult to talk of one Islamic revival. The causes are many and they vary from country to country. But the basic cause comes, I think, from an awareness, in the Third World countries, of poverty.

People have become very conscious of their poverty and their backwardness, and the feeling which we call a revival is partly a feeling that something has to be done in order to put this right. And in addition to those who are living in poverty there are those whose lot has improved. As it improves, they want even greater improvement and these are some of the most ardent "revivalists".

Perhaps because I am an economist, I tend to see things first in economic terms, but there is also a general dissatisfaction with what the West has to offer culturally and socially. People feel that it really has not made them happier.

If that is the fundamental cause, the reaction you are talking about is presumably occurring throughout the developing world. What separates out the Muslim revival from say a Christian one?

Christians themselves, if I may say so,



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are unable to agree about almost anything, and many Christians, in my experience, are very apologetic. I once heard on the BBC someone who apologized for believing in God, and I thought this was a terrible thing to have to say since she was a person of some standing in the community and politically. She said "I have to apologize". Why should you apologize? If you believe in something, you believe in something. This may be an unfair interpretation of Christianity in the modern world, but in the case of Islam you won't find this anywhere. You will not find any Muslim of any level in the Muslim countries from

Morocco to the Philippines saying "I apologize for having to affirm that there is only one God".

Of course, in the non-Christian countries the revival has taken different forms as in China, or Japan.

A lot of people would say that the real reason for the Muslim revival is money, oil. They argue that the Arabs in particular have taken advantage of the discovery of new wealth to reassert their ancient glory and they are doing it through the medium of Islam. How do you react to that?

I would merely say that oil has telescoped time. The roots of this revival must be found in World War II and the defeat in South-east Asia of the Western colonial powers by the Japanese.

Worldwide, the new-found oil wealth, and the power that goes with it, has delivered a cathartic shock, what the Japanese call *oiru shokku* ("oil shock") and this shock is terrible. It has given a group of people, the oil-producing, especially the Arab oil-producing countries, tremendous power and not only have they this power; they have gone into the Western cities to buy and invest. With this has gone small but significant contributory things, like the World Festival of Islam, which add to people's understanding.

But how does a revival of greatness in the Arab world impinge on the non-Arab Muslim world?

Part of this revival has involved copying

the rest of the world's endless conferences; oil has provided the money, which has made these conferences possible.

What are the main channels of change, are they religious or political?

I'd divide them into three. First, of course, is the revival of faith and the awareness, springing from the people themselves, with more people going back to look at the books and knowledge about Islamic history, about the growth of Islamic science, the influence of Arabic music on Western music and so on.

Such a revival deals with the Islamic soul, let us say. It is fundamental to all revival movements or ideologies that you have to have this movement inside the soul.

At the more mundane level - economics - there are two things: one of which is not solved, one of which is being solved. This latter item is the awareness of economic power through oil, so that now you've got Arab banks and Arab investments.

The Arabs have developed an ability to thrust into the Western economic system; into Europe, into America, through the purchase of advisers. They have sent their children to Harvard Business School and the London School of Economics. And through this, very quickly, they have penetrated the Western financial and commercial system.

This is absolutely in line with Arab history which has been a history of thrusting forward from Arabia itself with the new ideas. Yes, this time instead of horsemen galloping along the Northern Sahara all the way to Spain they have just flown there in their private jets and got going.

Then there is the other economic question and this in my opinion, with very great respect to all the Islamic economists and scholars, has not yet been solved. That is, to evolve, or to discover the model of the Islamic economic system. There is very little agreement on the role of interest, on the question of insurance, on the relations with other economic systems - capitalist or socialist - or on how such a model would work. This is going to be the thing that Islamic scholars, financiers and statesmen will have to devote their minds to during the next decade, and if they are as

smart as those Islamic scholars were between the 10th and 12th centuries maybe they will come up with something.

You haven't mentioned the impact of economics on politics. Presumably the lip service that is now being paid in many countries to Islam by the top politicians is a reflection of economic realities.

In Malaysia there have been no fundamental changes. We still have pawn shops and we are charging interest. We have introduced a series of laws which are tighter on certain patterns of behaviour than was the case before and if you go to official functions now they will not serve alcohol.

And, of course, all good leaders must reflect a social trend. Faith is increasing and the people expect to see their leaders behaving in a way which is in consonance with Islam.

But we are not dependent on Arab money. Very few of the universities for instance, have had any Arab money. No doubt it is very welcome and we are for ever sending missions there to get loans and so on, but we are also borrowing equally large amounts in the Japanese market, the European market, the American market. So, as for Malaysia, and I would say this goes for much of South-east Asia, having to appear very Islamic in order to get economic aid, that's not our style and does not need to be, any more than we would have to pretend to be Japanese, to get some Japanese money.

The other factor which you didn't mention is the influence of religious teaching, the influence of the great Islamic universities. How important is this?

I don't see it happening here. We have a department of Islamic studies and when these people come here we badger them with all sorts of questions to find out whether our understanding of things is the same as theirs.

Before we leave this general topic, could you comment on what is happening in countries like Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey where there has been a good deal of violence against the established order of things?

When there is discontent there is always the possibility of violence. We had our substantial dose of violence in the riots in Kuala Lumpur 10 years ago. But if

you look at the whole history of Islam, it doesn't necessarily lead to violence and some societies are more violent than others.

Women do not always seem to come off well in these revivalist movements. Do you feel that in the long run women stand to gain or to lose in the current move back to Islamic principles?

You cannot have emancipation in a vacuum. In some of the better-off Arab countries women have to work anyway, so all they've got to do is make sure that divorce is very difficult by various economic and legal arrangements.

In Malaysia we are opening up opportunities for Malay women to work in very large numbers. We've raised the number from 5,000 working women to 80,000 in the last six or seven years. Mostly these are young women working in electronics factories and assembly plants. They are leaving the rural areas and getting jobs and breaking free not only from parental control but from village control, and they are building up new ways of life and not always very good ways.

Nevertheless, these people can build a career, they can survive a divorce if necessary, whereas 10 years ago a village girl divorced by a soldier, for example, might well have drifted into prostitution.

In Malaysia we have provided opportunities for girls to go through secondary education, from where they can get factory and government jobs. If you go into government offices and business firms today the number of Malay girls you can see is really quite fantastic compared to what you could see five or six years ago. And this is changing our society.

Is the revival of traditional Muslim ideas going to hinder or help this process?

It depends on the country. In Malaysia, Indonesia, South-east Asia if there is a very strong revival, these women at least will not become, to sound very old-fashioned, fallen women. Their morale and their morals will be more in accordance with Islam.

But in our society, even if there is a revival we will stick by our own traditions of dress and behaviour because we are not Persians, we are not Arabs. We will take a moderate view. There will always be some people in our society who say there should be no singing or

dancing, that everybody should be covered up and that we should all look like Arabs. There are people who have persuaded communities to throw their television sets in the river. But then in every community you get outlandish movements of this sort from time to time.

Do you see some of the more extreme edicts of the Koran about women in relation to divorce and in relation to polygamy being somehow re-written?

They cannot be re-written because what is in the Koran is absolute, but you can make State laws to make divorce more difficult. The man can be forced to pay so much to the woman, to take care of the children. You can also make polygamy very difficult for the Koran says you must treat your wives equally, and therefore if a man is going to have four wives you can insist that he provides four houses and four motor cars and so on.

It is up to the educated women to go into the religious courts and assert their rights. Islam is administered by men but now more and more women are entering law faculties and studying abroad. They are raising their voices saying "No, no, no, we want to defend women". I am very interested myself in setting up an organization which will do precisely this for factory women.

In Bangladesh it is quite noticeable that among Muslim communities there is less practice of family planning than in the non-Muslim areas and this is partly due to the traditional teachings and beliefs of the local religious leaders. In Malaysia, too, the local religious leaders seem to be very ill-informed about some of these social issues. What can be done about that? The question that I would ask you is, what proportion in the age group goes through secondary school? You see, in Bangladesh, it must be very small. Here it is quite considerable. Once you've had a secondary education, your whole world view changes. And because the schools are co-educational, the pupils expect more equalitarian treatment with men.

There is another point. In Malaysia, the Muslim community has the highest infant mortality rate. Nowadays a lot of people, when they really understand it, will accept family planning on the grounds that by spacing out the children more will survive. As the Minister of

Finance said the other day, it is no good the Malays being champions at having children, if they also have the highest infant mortality rate. I think these things need to be discussed much more in Malay society, and some of the people on the religious side, in religious organizations, don't quite understand. They say that family planning will lead to fewer Muslims and that this is letting down the side.

Looking to the future, Islam is inherently a liberal religion and an adaptable one, but the de facto situation in many parts of the Muslim world shows that the status of many women is very depressed and that many local religious leaders have an unenlightened attitude. In view of this how do you see the future of the Muslim revival? Is it going to take a fairly rational and liberal direction, or is it going to turn back the clock in ways which will depress the status of women?

As a good Muslim I would say that only God knows the future, but if you want my view of what could happen I would say that in this part of the world particularly, Islam offers the spiritual and ideological basis for faith in something. One of the great weaknesses of Western civilization is the loss of faith. We are trying to bring our people from a backward state into a higher standard of living. If we do that without this faith we will have continual turmoil. By the time we are into a better economic situation, my own scenario for the West is greater decadence, greater chaos and greater loss of the little faith that they have.

If as Muslims, we can take the faith without getting involved in forms of social organization, forms of dress and eating and behaviour which characterize certain places that were Islamic at certain times in world history, we could enjoy a new Golden Age in which a hundred flowers bloom.

Whether we will get into an era with masses of blooms and a wonderful fragrance or whether the whole thing will collapse and stink depends very much, in this part of the world, on our capacity to manage our transition, to retain our faith and at the same time to have a high degree of tolerance because we can only survive by living with others.

For the rest of the Muslim world, I think the same message goes, because the world is one, it has shrunk. You can't

have just a Muslim band across the world map. You have to have relations with other people. We're all interlocked. So, Islam has to rediscover, in its revival, that Golden Age when Muslims had relations with China and with Europe, and when they could influence and be influenced and when they had great respect for learning. After all, Al-Azhar is the oldest existing university.

We should see further than the struggle here and there over women in purdah, or the agitations over whether women get a chance to work or not in some countries. This is a passing phase. We have to take a very broad view of history from maybe the beginning of Islam to now; after all, that is only 1,400 years.

I haven't seen much evidence that the countries which are largely Muslim have actually begun to create fairer societies. In many cases the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer. What has Islam got to say about a juster society?

It's true that the distribution of income in this society is becoming more unequal, but opportunities for education and opportunities for health and other facilities are greater today for the rural population than ever before.

The creation of the more just society is obviously going to take some time, but there are some very interesting experiments. Look at Gaddafi's experiments: who is to say this is not an attempt to show one model?

But you can only get into the just Islamic society when you practise the Islamic system of taxation and when you really practise the precepts of the Koran, which says again and again that you must create a "beautiful loan". That means you must give to the poor all the time. There should not be poor people around you while you are enjoying wealth.

How long will it take? All these sheiks with private jets, who are buying houses in Europe and who are having a mad time all over the world, these do not reflect what is going to go on in the Islamic world through the rest of the century.

But what is the model, and how will it come about? We don't really know yet. And in any case you must bear in mind that what we are talking of is what has happened in less than a decade. And normally for history you should look at half a century●