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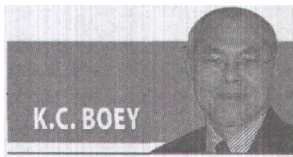
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Musawah beyond women's rights



Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir took time off a private visit to introduce the two-month-old Musawah to a Melbourne audience



THE vision from the Taliban stronghold in the Swat valley in Pakistan reinforces the stereotype yet again: what religion is this that strips women of their rights?

From violation of rights — as with the purported public whipping of an errant teen by turbaned Taliban enforcers, captured on amateur video — it's a small step to bombings, killings and indiscriminate terror; what value human life?

The backdrop raised a question at a public seminar at the University of Melbourne.

Musawah (Arabic for equality) — and its initiator, Malaysia's Sisters in Islam — is the global face of progressive, modern Islam.

Question: What ought the international community do to help foster Musawah? Conversely, what ought the international community avoid doing so as not to undermine what Musawah is working towards?

Public figure Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir was taking time off a private visit to introduce the barely two-month-old Musawah to a Melbourne audience.

Marina does not hold a position in Musawah. No one really does, it being a movement, beyond it having its founding secretariat at Sisters in Islam in Petaling Jaya.

Musawah was launched in Kuala Lumpur in February at a global meeting attended by 250 scholars and activists from 47 countries.

What it stands for is equality and justice in the Muslim family. It calls for equality, non-discrimination, justice and dignity as the basis of all human relations; full and equal citizenship for every individual; and marriage and family relations based on principles of equality and justice, with men and women sharing equal rights and responsibilities (<http://tinyurl.com/db632m>).

So what might the international community, particularly Western, non-Muslim — prospectively Marina's audience at the University of Melbourne — do? The question raises a conundrum. As Marina says: "We have to be very sensitive."

By this she means that an oft-used rebuttal of Islamic religious elders is

to accuse their challengers of being Westernised elites, when Musawah in fact professes to draw its inspiration from within Islam.

Which leaves the fight for now to be shouldered largely by "Muslim feminists", as Zainah Anwar, Musawah project director — and a founding member of Sisters in Islam — proclaims in a launch op-ed in the *International Herald Tribune*.

One drawback to keeping the conversation within Islam — between women and the established patriarchy — is that it potentially limits Musawah to feminist perspectives, when the movement holds out promise to make critical contributions to cross-cultural and civilisational dialogues.

This has implications for international relations and global security.

The sensitivity Marina raises is salient. "We (Muslim women) will have to do it ourselves," she says.

The onus, it would appear for now, rests with the international community, if it is to help foster equality and justice in more discreet fashion. It can avoid perpetuating the stereotypes.

The Taliban whipping on video, if it were true and not Taliban propaganda as suggested in one report, could be treated with more circumspection.

The demonisation of particular streams of Islam ignores the rich and diverse interpretations of the faith, as with other faiths. It risks giving oxygen to terrorist groups with which to attract cannon fodder.

Marina acknowledges the prospects for Musawah to take the movement beyond Muslim feminist

objectives.

Musawah wouldn't see it as its primary goal, "(but) it would be a happy by-product", she says, "a natural by-product. It's already happening ... in the public forums that the movement engages in all over the world (including in Canada, the United States)".

It's being picked up in Marina's advocacy in Malaysia and internationally on HIV-AIDS, and in her public advocacy through the media and in her blogs.

In the international forums, the non-Muslim world could be more open to acknowledging the diversity within Islam. Australia at the official level is increasingly engaging with

the region in multi-faith gatherings, particularly with Indonesia.

So, too, at "third track" level, through whose advocacy Melbourne will this December host the Parliament of the World's Religions (<http://tinyurl.com/6dur3b>).

Prominent among advocates on dialogue is the Centre for Dialogue (<http://tinyurl.com/c7vz2r>) at La Trobe University (*New Straits Times*, April 5), whose director Professor Joe Camilleri through Pax Christi is further engaged with the International Movement for a JUST World in Malaysia.

Over at Monash University over the week, doctoral candidate Sven Schottman was presenting a seminar on his work in progress, of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's engagement with Islam as "a theology of progress".

Schottman's findings are of a liberal interpretation of Islam altogether compatible with modernity.

Beyond the university gates, what is not clear is of a public at the popular level prepared to look beyond the stereotypes.

The conversation at Marina's presentation on Musawah was largely between Muslims, who made up most of the audience. A broader participation might have added to the mosaic.

It may have reflected the circumstances of Marina's private visit. Her profile did draw the attention of public broadcaster ABC, whose conversation with her would add to the understanding.

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