

Decolonisation of universities begins with us

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THEY were knocked off their pedestals just as rudely as Saddam Hussein statues were pulled down from their mountings after the Americans and their mostly western allies overran Baghdad in 2003.

Among them are such gods of science and mathematics as Sir Isaac Newton, famous for his law on why apples fall. He was pilloried for allowing his fear of the Church of England to deter him from publishing some of his best discoveries – his true masterpieces.

Others who were knocked down included people like Kepler, Descartes and Einstein. And so was Galileo who invented the telescope but was in trouble with the Catholic Church when he could see too far into the heavens.

All these bashings and the questioning of the assumptions on which human knowledge is based took place during the three-day International Conference on Decolonising Our Universities that ended on Wednesday in Penang. It was the fourth in the series of Multiversity Conference organised by Citizens International and Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Nicolaus Copernicus is remembered mostly as a mathematician and an astronomer but few know that he is also a monk and it was because of this that his claim that the earth moves around the sun and not the other way round as was originally believed was easily

accepted by the church.

But the conference was told that he was not the revolutionary scientist he has been made out to be. He was a just a common plagiarist. He merely translated the work of Ibn Shatir of Damascus.

It was also told that few academics, scientists, mathematicians, astronomers and other researchers were really free of the influence of Christian theology because for centuries the church was the key consumer of the products of the western university system and therefore had to remain loyal.

The conference was told that anyone who challenged the church had to suffer and it was for that purpose that the Inquisition was instituted. Rival institutions also suffered and this was the fate of the great university complex of Alexandria, of which the famous library was a part.

Many wondered aloud whether Christian theology still influences western academicians and brought up the brilliant Stephen Hawking whom most Malaysians know only as the writer of a small book, *A Brief History of Time*.

Hawking wrote many other books and some contain quite a bit of Christian propaganda. He even attempted to reconcile the Big Bang of a few billion years ago with the Bible story of creation in seven days some 6,000 years ago.

Many other gods of science and mathematics, as the world know of them, were also called liars. The great 16th century cartographer Gerardus Mercator whose maps

and charts helped the Europeans to reach the East was so fearful of the church that he did not acknowledge his non-Christian and especially Muslim sources.

Another great god of science and mathematics, Albert Einstein, was dragged down from his Olympian heights when it was disclosed that his formula on the theory of relativity was corrected by Indian scientist and mathematician C. K. Raju recently.

The expose by the scholars and participants from 20 countries help to convince those who were still hesitant about the need for efforts to decolonise universities – still very much Eurocentric – in Asia and Africa that the knowledge they had been “brainwashed” into believing as being universal was not universal at all and based on false assumptions.

It was also meant to provoke re-thinking about the assumptions they had made based on discoveries and ideas of western scholars published in western academic journals, that nothing should be accepted as universal truth without careful scrutiny.

Students have often assumed calculus, the subject they learn in mathematics, is of western origin. Nothing is further from the truth. It was stolen from India by the Jesuits, said Raju who said the mode of calculation was important for navigational purposes.

It helped Vasco da Gama to reach the Cape of Good Hope and Goa.

According to Datuk Shad Saleem Faruqi, emeritus professor of law and legal adviser, Universiti Teknologi Mara, who is also visiting

professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia, the Europeans think nothing of falsifying history.

He said everyone seems to think that the Johannes Gutenberg's printing press, developed in the 15th century, was the first in the world when a number of western scholars were aware that Pi Sheng had already developed one in 1040 but little is said of him.

Likewise, the West seems reluctant to acknowledge scholars from India, China, Africa and those from the Muslim world and promotes the idea that the Bologna monastic school was the first university.

Thus, few know about the great universities of Taxila, Nalanda, Zaytuna and Nanjing which preceded Bologna.

On legal education, he said, it is still very much western-centric and lamented that despite the existence of local law programmes since 1972, the Legal Profession Act continues to recognise foreign (mostly UK) law degrees and qualifications.

On the Act's permission to foreign lawyers to be admitted on an ad hoc basis to argue special cases, he was cynical to the idea of inviting Cherry Blair as a human rights expert when there are hundreds of local ones. Fortunately, the judge was not an Uncle Tom and he rejected her application.

Because of this, the conference agreed that while the physical colonisation is long gone – hopefully so, said some – the mental colonisation is very much alive. Thus the call for the need to purge the “West in us” before efforts to decolonise can truly begin.