

Muslim Professionals Forum Berhad

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Human relations in multi-religious Malaysia: Debunking the religious myths!

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1. Introduction

The recent past has seen a plethora of incidents which threatens to fracture the religious harmony which this nation has thus far enjoyed. The “Cow-Head protest”, in Shah Alam in August 2009, against a proposed Hindu temple in Section 23, displayed unveiled disrespect and hatred towards our Hindu citizens. At least three churches in the Klang Valley were torched in early January 2010, by cowardly and utterly senseless act of a group of misguided, chauvinistic, religious bigots. This was later followed by arson attacks against two suraus in Muar in late January 2010. And most recently, on 20 April 2015, we witnessed the mindless act of incitement by 50 residents in Taman Medan over the display of a cross on a newly minted church.

These heinous acts of religious provocations, hatred and violence committed presumably in the name of Islam desecrates the very religion it purports to protect. Religious hegemony and intolerance in a pluralistic society will invariably result in conflict and will only frustrate the claim that Islam is a religion of compassion, peace and freedom.

Islam commands the believers to embrace diversity because it is part of the law of nature (*Sunnatullah*) that He created.

‘If your Lord so willed, He could have made mankind one people.’ Qur’an 11:118

But, He created them to dwell in His kingdom in varieties. God created the different sexes and ethnic groups among mankind (30:22) that they might know and understand each other (49:13). The Qur’an (49: 13) clearly states that:

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (li ta’Arafu)”.

The famous Tunisian Islamic scholar, Tahir Ibn Ashur in his commentary of this verse, mentioned that the import of piety after emphasizing the pluralistic nature of humankind was to educate mankind the true meaning of humility and mutual recognition through the practice of mutually knowing each other (Ibn Ashur, Tahir (no date), *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir*, Tunis: Dar Suhnun, 10/259).

One of the least recognized yet pivotal universal value that can mitigate if not solve some of the nation’s problems is that of respecting diversity, loving it and cultivating it as a source of enrichment and beauty, an essential element of our human experience.

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Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

“O humankind! Your Lord is one Lord, and you have one father. All of you are from Adam, and Adam is from dust. The noblest of you is the most God-fearing. No Arab has any superiority over a non-Arab, no non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab, no black person has any superiority over a white person, and no white person has any superiority over a black person – superiority is only through piety.” [Narrated by al-Tirmidhî]

2. *La Convenvicia* (the Co-existence)

Islam perceives religious diversity and plurality as a “*Sunnatullah*”, the behest of the Al-Mighty. It acknowledges the plurality of religions and allows the adherents of all religions the plurality of laws to govern their lives within the aegis of their religious beliefs and principles (see al-Quran: 8:72–5; 35:32; 4:95; 60:8–9).

Islam accords special status to Judaism and Christianity, categorically calling their adherents, “*Ahl al-Kitab*” (People of the Book). It identifies itself with the People of the Book as the “Abrahamic family” within the Semitic Tradition (*Hanifiyyah*), the tradition of Abraham who is recognized as the father of the three Semitic religions.

The call of Islam is not towards the homogenisation of society into one culture, identity or faith but the observation and practise of good conduct and civility so as to ensure that diversity will nurture peace and the common good. The Qur’ān proclaims that differences among human beings will remain (see al-Quran: 11:118–19). Hence, it is neither possible, nor commanded, to make everyone believe in one faith (see al-Quran: 10:99).

Peaceful co-existence with the other and mutual respect is a fundamental teaching of Islam. This is manifested through Islam’s commands to respect other faiths, to avoid interfering in matters concerning other religions (see al-Quran: 109:1–6), prohibitions against any form of compulsion and coercion in faith (see al-Quran: 2:256, 272; 10:99) and rebuking or insulting other faiths (see al-Quran: 6:108).

Peaceful co-existence and harmonious cohesion with other religious communities has been well documented in Islamic history since the Prophet began his call to Islam in Makkah and unfolded one of the greatest political documents in human history, *Sahifah al-Madinah* or the constitution of Madinah (622 AD). This treatise embraced 20 major principles including Unity, Diversity, Conduct, Fighting Injustice, Search or Striving for Peace, Freedom of Religion and the Rule of Law.

Another illustrious model was the *La Convivencia* in Andalusia during the Islamic rule in Spain. The spirit of mutual respect and recognition did not only flourish the Islamic civilisation, but also enhanced the Christian and Jewish intellectual and cultural environment (Pagden, Anthony (2008). *Worlds at War: The 2,500-Year Struggle between East & West*. New York: Oxford University Press: 153-54).

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Therefore, mutual respect (*tasamuh*) and recognition (*tafahum*) of other believers and their beliefs are sacred and *sine qua non* to ensure a harmonious and peaceful world community.

3. Universal Brotherhood (Ukhuwwah)

Islam sets its own paradigm in defining the social nature of individuals and society. Unlike many human inspired ideologies, the relationship between individuals in Islam is firmly united by the spirit of ‘*ukhuwwah*’, which philosophically connotes and implies a much wider meaning than captured by the term ‘*brotherhood*’.

To emphasize this fundamental tenet, the, Qur’an notes:

“And hold fast, all together, by the rope which God (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude God’s favour on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus doth God make His Signs clear to you: That ye may be guided” (Qur’an, 3:103).

In the same spirit, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was reported as saying that:

“You will not enter Paradise until you have faith, and you will not have faith until you love each other. Shall I direct you to something, which if you fulfil it you will love one another? Spread peace among yourselves”. (Narrated by Muslim)

A proper deconstruction of the aforementioned verses and traditions leads us to understand the main theme of *ukhuwwah* in Islam, which is *mahabbah* (mutual love) and *ithar* (mutual altruism). The al-Qur’an states:

“And cooperate with one another in all that is good and pious and do not cooperate in sin and aggression.” (Qur’an, 5: 2).

It is through *takaful* (*mutual cooperation and protection*) that *ukhuwwah* can be profoundly articulated where all individuals in the community are regarded as one nation or one body, who must mutually serve and cooperate with each other in decency and virtue, de rigueur to advocate justice, fairness, mercy and the higher objectives of the *Shari’ah*.

Thus, the concept of *ukhuwwah* is not exclusive but is both inclusive and universal. It encompasses comprehensive solidarity not only amongst Muslims, but also towards other fellow human beings which Islam considers as brethren in humanity (al-Qaradawi, 2008: 51).

In supporting this notion, Dr Wahbah al-Zuhayli, a contemporary Muslim scholar from Syria has insisted that there is no contradiction between the brotherhood relations borne out of religiosity and the universal brotherhood of mankind. Both are inter-related, and both are

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highly acknowledged and recommended in Islam (al-Zuhayli, Wahbah (1998). al-Quran al-Karim; Bunyatuh al-Tashri'iyyah wa Khasa-isuh al-Hadariyyah, Damsyik: Dar al-Fikr: 93.)

A similar sentiment was echoed by Syeikh Abdullah Ibn Bayyah, a prominent contemporary Maliki scholar from Mauritania. He emphasized that despite the differences amongst the members of societies, every rational mind recognizes justice and every language has a word for it – a word which is recognized as having a positive and noble meaning. The same can be said for “truth”, “liberty”, “tolerance”, “integrity” and many other concepts. These are praised by all cultures and expressed positively in all languages.

The opposites of these concepts like “tyranny” and “oppression” are regarded with derision and are rejected universally.

These shared values needs to be actively mainstreamed and promoted in the world today in our joint and universal quest to build a better world

(<http://www.binbayyah.net/portal/research/148>).

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said in the hadîth:

“No one truly believes until he wants for his brother what he wants for himself.”

The leading Hanbalî jurist, Ibn Rajab in his commentaries on 40 hadiths of al-Nawawi said that: “The brotherhood referred to in this hadîth is the brotherhood of humanity.” The value of “human brotherhood” is poignantly tagged with the message of “love” in these words of the Prophet (PBUH).

Love is a highly pleasurable and desired emotional state as well as a code of conduct. It is a shared value, since all people are pleased with it, even those who do not act according to its dictates. When love is realized and manifested by both parties, understanding and mutual respect germinates and hostilities are reduced.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) encouraged us to proclaim our love, saying: “If one of you loves his brother, he should let him know it.”

4. Human Equality

The principle of individuals’ equality was highlighted in Prophet Muhammad’s final sermon during his farewell pilgrimage (*khutbah al-wida*):

“All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action.” (Narrated by Ahmad)

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Instead of directing his message exclusively to the Muslim community, the Prophet (PBUH) preceded with a universal appeal to mankind by asserting the principle of equality. This important principle and guidance implies that he is not self-centred nor concerned only about the Muslim community's interest and affairs, but rather his deliverance as "the mercy for all mankind" as stated in the Qur'an (3: 110).

Toynbee (1948: 205) regarded the Islamic notion of human equality as "*one of the outstanding achievements of Islam*" in which according to him, "*in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue*". (Toynbee, Arnold (1948). *Civilization on Trial*. New York: Oxford University Press: 205).

In the same vein, Gibb (1932: 379) notes that: "*Islam has a still further service to render to the cause of humanity. It stands after all nearer to the real East than Europe does, and it possesses a magnificent tradition of inter-racial understanding and cooperation.*" Gibb further insists that: "*No other society has such a record of success uniting in an equality of status, of opportunity, and of endeavours so many and so various races of mankind.*" (Gibb, Sir Hamilton A.R. (1958). *Mohammedanism*. Cambridge: Mentor Edition: 379)

5. Conclusion:

The last 100 years, has been one of the bloodiest in human history. We have seen two world wars, WWII alone killing at least 30 million people. Self-proclaimed champions of human rights and freedom are complicit in the Zionist occupation of Palestine and the war in Yemen and Syria. And supposedly proponents of a nuclear free world has dropped bombs in Japan, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan.

Nearer to home, our beloved country has not witnessed such an excess of religious and racial strife since the bloody days of 13 May 1969 and unless checked with an effective and just political and societal governance we are surely on the slippery slope of anarchy.

Allah has created all human beings with honour and dignity, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and has elevated their status above His other creations. Almighty Allah says in the Quran (17:70)

"We gave honour and dignity (Karamat) to the children of Adam"

As much as we would like to be honored and shown dignity, we have to recognize the dignity and honour of others. We need to understand and respect other's religious beliefs and cultures. There is a pressing need for people of all faiths to know and respect other's religious beliefs and to work together.

Interfaith dialogues, discourse and scholarships is one such platform to facilitate this "unity in diversity" and through the recognition of our common universal values, helps to engender solutions to the issues affecting our respective communities. Authentic understanding and

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mutual respect of the other helps to evolve a sustainable religious harmony in our mutual quest to please our creator.

And as the vicegerent (*Khalifah*) of Allah on earth and inheriting the vast treasures of peaceful initiatives of our predecessors, we Muslims need to do much better and should be exemplary in our actions and deeds vis a vis the adherents of other faiths.

Unfortunately, the actions of the few in our country, which among others has inadvertently equated Islam with racism, their failure to recognize the equality of man before his creator, their parochial understanding of the brotherhood of man and their blatant impingement on other religions has tarnished the image of the messenger of Allah (PBUH) as *rahmatan lil alamin*, mercy upon mankind.

We hope this inclusive approach helps to reassure our fellow Malaysians from other belief systems of the Islamic position on human relations in our multi religious community. It is a discourse derived from the original texts of the revealed al-Quran and the Prophetic traditions.

Similarly, we invite all our fellow Muslims to connect with mutual respect and love with our fellow Malaysians from other religious persuasions, within the wide and divine paradigm as scribed by the authentic texts and guided by the higher objectives of the *Shariah* (*Maqasid Shariah*).

Together, hand in hand in religious harmony we can build a “Better Malaysia” founded on the eternal values of justice, equality, mutual benefit (*masalih mushtarakah*) and the brotherhood and dignity of humanity.

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