

The Negative Impact of Religious Pluralism on the Islamic Society in Malaysia

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Abstract: Religious pluralism is a belief that often gives rise to disputes and debates among various quarters, either for or against the motion. The Islamic society in Malaysia seems to be in a dilemma when it comes to taking a firm stand on this matter. This study intends to discuss and display the facts concerning religious pluralistic beliefs while explaining its danger towards the value of religiosity in Malaysia. The methodology used will be library research and hermeneutic methods. This study concludes that this belief can confuse the beliefs of the muslims and distance them from the true practices of Islam. This situation demands that all quarters must play a role in controlling the spread of religious pluralistic beliefs within the society.

Key words: Religious pluralism, Islamic society, tolerance, equality, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In the context of today, religious pluralism has become a heated topic of discussion by all parties, especially academicians and religious figures (Calo, 2010). Religious pluralism has gained the attention and has raised concerns among the society because it is becoming widespread and its influence is gaining in strength, especially in Malaysia. Among the Islamic society, many do not realize the danger that accompanies the beliefs of religious pluralism. They are blinded by the theme of religious tolerance values enshrined in the belief. In fact, this belief emphasizes the value of equality or uniformity of religion that states that all religions are the same and there is no less dignity in one religion compared to another. The concept of uniformity is clearly against the values held by a society that is religious, especially the Islamic society.

TERMINOLOGY AND HISTORY

Before researchers debate the dangers of this thought, the meaning of religious pluralism has to be explained first. The ambiguity that surrounds the concept of religious pluralism that eventually evokes numerous views either in the form of pro or contra is the consequence of the confusion created by attaching a definition to the term. Pluralism refers to the standard

of rationality, morality or personality, characteristics and features that are attached to a heterogeneous situation. Religion is defined as the whole form of beliefs, confidence and ideologies in humans. Briefly, the term religious pluralism refers to thinking related to communities made up of several religions and cultures and is able to live together in harmony and unison.

The general meaning of religious pluralism is not in conflict with Islamic teaching but that understanding has brought about 2 different forms of interpretation (Mazrui, 1997). Hence, it has given effect to the understanding and acceptance of the Islamic society. Firstly, religious pluralism is construed according to the features of tolerance and secondly, it is construed according to the meaning of equality which is the assumption that all religions are similar (Jaffer, 2004). To ascertain an accurate understanding, it is appropriate that the term be referred to the party that coined that term. From an historical perspective, the pluralism phenomenon started in Europe during the 18th century. This phenomenon is actually based on the belief of liberalism which is orientated on logic or rationalism and the liberation of the mind from the crutches of religious tyranny when the society there was going through the phase of enlightenment.

At the end, the protestant order was born in Europe and saw a need to re-define the Holy Bible. The intellectuals rose to write books against the religious rulings of the church. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543),

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) were among the prominent figures who criticized the influence and power of the Catholic Church. In pursuance to the involvement of intellects that criticised religion, feudal groups and later the capitalists, socialist-marxist groups also came up with theories and movements to oppose the autonomy of the Catholic Church. The Protestant order gradually garnered support and finally, the Renaissance arose in Europe. Religion and God had lost their power and sovereignty. The truth was obtainable from humans based on rational thought or experience and not from religious texts. In the early 20th century, religious pluralism thought became consolidated in the minds of Western society just when a declaration by the Vatican Council II in the 60's had declared the doctrine that public safety covers all religions besides Christianity (Vatican, 1980). This thought reached its maturity after going through a number of phases of discussions until it had spread all over the world. In short, religious pluralism and Islamic liberalism have such a strong relationship that religious pluralism is believed to be a significant characteristic to Islamic liberalism.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE VALUE OF TOLERATION

The reality of assuming that religious pluralism is religious tolerance is a subjective view and it is obviously denied by experts and advocates of pluralism. Diana L. Eck, the director of The Pluralism Project in Harvard University in the United States asserted, Pluralism is not just Tolerance. She also said that:

I would propose that pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance to the active attempt to understand the other. Although, tolerance is no doubt a step forward from intolerance, it does not require new neighbors to know anything about one another. Tolerance comes from a position of strength. I can tolerate many minorities if I am in power but if I myself am a member of a small minority, what does tolerance mean? A truly pluralist society will need to move beyond tolerance toward constructive understanding. Tolerance can create a climate of restraint but not a climate of understanding. Tolerance is far too fragile a foundation for a religiously complex society and in the world in which researchers live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly

The statement simultaneously explains the meaning of pluralism according to the pluralist fraternity which is

a true pluralistic characteristic. Even though, as such she does not rule out the significance of toleration. There is no question that tolerance is important, explained Eck in her book from Diversity to Pluralism. She further added that but tolerance by itself may be a deceptive virtue. The reality is toleration is only a part of the main characteristics of religious pluralism (Eck, 2006).

Hence, religious pluralism does not mean toleration as what it is understood to be but the emphasis on pluralism is more towards uniformity or equality in all matters including the religious aspect. This means that every religious follower appropriately should view equally all religions and its followers. This view would eventually deny the concept of impiety-blasphemy and monothiesm-polythiesm as strictly upheld in Islam.

ISLAM AND VALUES OF EQUALITY

Islam possesses a distinctive concept of equality and a concept of the relationship between religious followers that is proven efficacious and far different from the concept of quality according to religious pluralism. As such, since adaptation is a term in pluralism which is rather referred to as religious toleration, it is a concept that should be accepted in all religiously related contexts. Briefly, although Islam accepts and respects the concept of religious freedom, it never once accepted the concept of equality that has been propagated by religious pluralism beliefs which views that all religions are true and have the same objectives. It only suffices that researchers quote 2 verses from the al-Qur'an that disposes beliefs such as these. Allah SWT, the Almighty exhorted:

Truly, the religion with Allah is Islam (Qur'an: 3:19). And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers (Qur'an: 3:85)

Therefore, equality according to the mold of religious pluralism is an element contrary with the teachings of Islam. This element could bring along immense negative effects onto society because it would dispel the original identity of Islam from society.

THE DANGERS OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISTIC BELIEFS

Following are a few inferences concerning the dangers of religious pluralism beliefs. First, the Islamic society loses its pride towards Islam because according to this belief all religions are the same and there is no advantage held by any religion that exist on this earth. All of them will bring eternal happiness to mankind. In simple

terms, all religions take their followers to heaven. One of Indonesias religious figures who upholds this belief is Ulil Absar Abdallah, the former coordinator of the Islamic Liberalization Network in Indonesia who had written in the newspaper Kompas dated 18 November, 2002 that:

Without any bashfulness or apprehension, I say that all religions are at the exact path, the long path that leads to the truthful one. Therefore, all religions are true with different variations, levels and depths in appreciating the pathway of that religion. All religions belong to one big identical family which is a family that loves the road to never ending truth (Mohammad, n.d.)

The researcher is also confident barring the belief is accepted it will create a society that is void of religion in its true sense whereby the followers do not possess the original characteristics anymore. It could be possible for the society to profess to a teaching or new religion that is a combination of all the existing religions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism which can be called the Iskribuhi religion (Feener, 2002). Lastly, the true religious values would be eroded little by little.

Second, to encourage the phenomenon of apostasy where ultimately the party that tries to arrest this phenomenon from becoming wide spread is seen as a threat to religious freedom. May be apostasy can be accepted openly one day (Mohammad, n.d.). Perhaps, the mix marriages that occur in Indonesia may occur in this country. The mix marriages referred here are not mix marriages that are normally accepted by the Islamic society in Malaysia which are marriages involving couples of different ethnic origins but practicing the same religion like an Islamic woman of Chinese origin marrying an Islamic man of Malay origin. Mix marriages brought about by religious pluralism is marriage that involves couples either from the same ethnic origin or differing origins but each one of them vouching their own religion like a Hindu marrying a Islamic woman. This would result in a disorganized religious identity for the family and the ensuing children summable from the sharing of lives of the couples. This situation is not something unusual if researchers scrutinize the methods of thinking that are being propagated by supporters of religious pluralism. For example, it is stated in the book *Fiqih Lintas Agama* that the question of non-Muslim men marrying muslim women is an *ijtihad* matter and is tied to certain contexts, among them is the Islamic puritanical context at that moment where the Islamic community was not as big as it is today, such that marriage between religions is something prohibited. Since, its position as a code or law is a result of the *ijtihad* process, hence the possibilities are when new opinions are triggered, Muslim women would be able to marry non-Muslim men or marriages of different

religions on a big scale would be allowed no matter what the religion or belief (Cammack *et al.*, 1996). The teachings of Islam that are seen as contradictory with the concept of equality brought along with this belief would be rejected or given a new definition in parallel with the belief (Eck, 2007). Instances like this actually have and are still happening in this country by using numerous techniques and methods to cover the actual personality of the party that supports the religious pluralistic belief and Islamic liberalism. This group creates new teachings to correct Islam, to transcend human logic over divine revelation, critically define divine revelation based more on sensuality or compulsion and make Islam becomes an adherent of the situation, instead of making Islam the leader of the situation. Based on the method above, they had created numerous new doctrines about Islam far different from what has been agreed by members of the Sunni school of thought. About 2 examples that can be shared: First, divine revelation is divided into 2 categories: Written and un-written revelation. Written revelation is the Al-Qur'an and it is primarily texts. Un-written revelation is the human mind and the human mind actually enlivens the texts of the Al-Qur'an based on intentions, context and situational factors. Hence, the Al-Qur'an is in the nature of explaining the intentions of religion while the human mind accommodates it within the context of an era. In simple language, the mind is in a higher position compared to the Al-Qur'an.

Second, the Prophet Muhammad is just a human who possess the ability to lead other humans (leadership values). Therefore, anyone who can lead can take over the prophet hood features of the Prophet Muhammad in leading humankind towards good character. According to them, the Prophet Muhammad is only an ordinary human who usually makes mistakes and is truthful. In addition, the Islamic community thus far has pretended that His highness is a perfect man, so much so that besides worshipping the Al-Qur'an texts, also worshiped the Prophet Muhammad. The personal details of the Prophet Muhammad is not more than that of an ordinary human who can be extolled and criticized. Hence, the Islamic community should be critical when considering the good and bad points of His highness.

The dangers earlier explain the negative impact brought about by religious pluralistic beliefs and its major threats towards religious identity, especially on the Islamic society. In reality, this phenomenon has spread and has such a wide influence in Indonesia. Among the figures of this movement is Budhy Munawar-Rachman, Abdul Munir Mulkan dan Harun Nasution. The apprehension of the religious bodies there had brought about the reaction and response of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia or MUI (Council of Indonesian Islamic Theologians) until a religious edict (fatwa) was delivered

in 2005. The edict stated that secular, pluralistic and liberal beliefs (also known as SIPILIS) are beliefs that are against Islam and the Muslim community is forbidden from adhering and following that belief (Sirry, 2013). This phenomenon has increasingly spread to Malaysia. As in Indonesia, the consequence of this negative ideological contagion had in 2006 caused the Malaysian Muslim Theologians Polemic which convened in Perak and headed by the Mufti of Perak, Tan Sri Harussani, to issue a resolution declaring that religious pluralistic beliefs are forbidden.

PLURALISM AND INTER-FAITH DIALOG

It cannot be denied that there exists a relationship between religious pluralism and interfaith dialog. Looking at dialog as an instrument that links religious harmony, there are certain quarters that wish to enkindle the religious pluralistic belief through the process of dialog. In Malaysia as an example, formation of the IFC (Interfaith Committee) has that intention. It can be seen in its claim that non-Muslims do not have to be a Muslim if they want to marry a Muslim. Muslims, on the other hand are to be allowed to leave Islam without any legal action taken against them. These are the main reasons that had caused a portion of the Islamic community to have a negative perception towards the interfaith dialog. In Malaysia, the element of religious equality that was brought about by religious pluralism had destroyed the call for interfaith dialog. Interfaith dialog should have the intention to build the spirit of cooperation among different religious followers to initiate something for the good of all. This spirit of cooperation should be pivoted on values of equality that exist in all religions such as extolling truth, justice, politeness, courteous and so forth but not to equate or unite all religions.

Hence, religious pluralistic beliefs deny the unique differential elements that exist in every religion. Because of this, it threatens the continuity of religious identity that has been protected by all parties that are committed to their own principles. With that too, the view that relates religious pluralism and clash of civilizations is a view with substance.

CONCLUSION

From the discussions, it can be concluded that religious pluralism denies and rejects the elements of difference that exists among various religions. By supporting such negative values, religious pluralism does not respect the unique values held by followers of each religion. The Islamic community as an example holds on to basics, such as Islam being the only religion accepted by Allah (SWT) the Almighty. Although, as such they also believe that Islam commands that they savor good relations with followers of other religions, as long as the relationship is pivoted on truth and good will besides not jeopardizing the importance of Islam. Hence, the spread of this belief needs to be checked and monitored with numerous approaches, especially education and continuous elucidation to every walk of society.

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