Unity In Religious And Spiritual Diversity: A Discourse On The Roles Of Higher Learning Institutions In Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Dwelling in the sphere of diversity be it spiritual, religious and cultural settings like Malaysia, there must be a mechanism to put people together under the same roof and articulate with one voice in the course of humanity as the religion of plural society. Having the shared values such as tolerance, respect, cooperation, understanding and openness in religious and spiritual diversity are said to be the ingredients of unity in pluralism. Realizing this global aspiration demands strategies to be addressed at the grass root level, education is seen to be one of arenas that must be included to have a share in this mission. Therefore, some of recommendation of ideas are put forth in relation to uphold the proposition of unity in religious and spiritual diversity that are feasible and plausible to be implemented in Malaysian higher learning institutional level as so the Malaysian society we produce are the advocates of the world of peace, harmony, compassion, justice and dignity among human beings. In this paper, the roles of higher learning institution can be seen in four avenues, i) the practice of soulful education as the institutional philosophy, ii) demonstration of right notion of academic leadership in university ecosystem, iii) promoting interfaith dialogues in campus.

Keywords: unity, religious diversity, spiritual diversity, higher learning institution, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is renowned as a country that is plural in nature. As in 2017, total population of Malaysia is estimated at 32.00 million and 28.7 million of the total Malaysian populations are Malaysian citizens while 3.3 million are non-Malaysian citizens. In the same year, Bumiputeras recorded an increase of 0.2 percentage points compared to 2016, which was 68.8 % of total population of citizens. However, Chinese dropped by 0.2 % points to 23.2 per cent, while Indians and others remained at 7.0 % and 1.0 % respectively as compared to 2016. In terms of religious affiliation, Muslims are made up 58% of the population while Buddhists constitute to 18%, Christians with 9% and 5% goes to Hindus (Malaysia Department of Statistics, 2017).

The diversity of Malaysia has been dominantly governed for her social unity through the mechanism of constitution in which political roles of dominant race, Muslim-Malays

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politicians have played a great deal based on the matrix of social contract agreed between races in the fabric of historical narratives. Provenly, ever since our nation secured Independence in August 1957, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia has allocated the Article 3 as a provision of positioning Islam as the official religion of the land as being read simultaneously with Article 11 that allows the profession of other religions than Islam in peace and harmony as a manifestation of fundemental liberties for Malaysians (Federal Constitution Malaysia, 1957). However, this utilitarian approach seems to be flowering its setback to the pluralism experiment in Malaysia. The May 1969 racial riot that had signified the hatred and resentment between Chinese and Malays are due to the pro-Malay policy orientation in state administration, economy, culture and education in the name of affirmative action and supplementary scheme (Hussin Mutalib, 2010). From the prohibition case of “Isu Kalimah Allah” by Christians, the absurd detention of Mr. Mustafa Akyol who gave lecture in a claimed liberal movement’s program to the barring of non-muslims from using the laundry service from a Muslim’s self-service laundrette shop, Malaysia seems to be in disharmony state in which the religious difference becomes the prime cause of the divide (Norshahril Saat, 2016).

These events happened due to the exclusiveness of elites’ religion practiced in Malaysia in which has triggered non-muslims and moderate Muslims movement affiliations to speak up and the liberals are not shamely manifesting their provocative antics againts those defensive religious authoritarians’ attitudes in approaching diversity in public. This tension is getting complex if it is not being curbed from the grass root level because it will continuously stir us up with religious sentiments that continuously favours the radicals to stay in power backed by the vote of majority race yet the rebels will always being determined to go transgress on the name of human freedoms. These two extreme champs are causing the frictional harmony among our citizens and this is cancerous due to the minimal efforts of government in educating citizens with interfaith literacy.

Quoting John Chance (2013) saying that “Religion in the 21st Century can be either a force for reconciliation and politica stability or a wedge that deeply divides... It is now time for it to be used for reconciliation and diplomatic peacemaking.” On this note, educational arena is where this effort should be embarked. Catering this issue from the premise Malaysia is a country that upholds the spirit of theism on the basis of the first tenet of Rukun Negara, education is in the position to shape the mentality and behavior of society must be intervened.
to channel the interfaith literacy among societal members for the survival of Malaysia to stay harmony despite of accommodating the religious and spiritual diversity as so the Malaysian society we produce are the advocates of the world of peace, harmony, compassion, justice and dignity among human beings. In this paper, the roles of higher learning institution can be seen in three avenues, i) the practice of soulful education as the institutional philosophy, ii) demonstration of right notion of academic leadership in university ecosystem, iii) promoting interfaith dialogues in campus.

Understanding The Essences Of Religion And Spirituality: Unity In Diversity

Undoubtedly, both religion and spirituality have always played an important role in shaping individual personalities and also communities. Almost all religions in this world have their own concept and meaning when it comes to the matter of religion definition. Indeed, the multi-facet religion is an arduous sort to be defined. Atran (2002) and Boyer (2001) view religion as a great potpourri of ideas and behavior with many independent evolutionary origins outside of religion itself. According to Kirkpatrick (2005), he perceives religion as psychological attachment, a powerful emotional relationship to things. As in tandem with the idea of multi-faceted nature the religion is, religion in more precise fashion can be said as a set of tenets and practices based on specific metaphysical, supernatural, theological and ethical explanations about ultimate reality, the cosmos, the human nature, and often codified in form of prayers, rituals or religious laws.

Meanwhile, spirituality in etymological sense refers to anything that associates with spirit or soul, and not that of physical sorts. Spirituality is a trajectory emphasizing on self-awareness, human interdependence, creativity, practicality, social justice and divine love. It enables transformation in a natural way without mitigating our basic human nature. It establishes a harmonious relationship between human beings, the Creator and his creations. Spirituality is also seen as a right medium to preserve high moral conduct, values and orders. It also boosts the recovering of the human norm and reaching the profoundly genuine humanness. In Islam as defined by Nasr, spirituality is the presence of a relationship with Allah, that affects the individual’s self-worth, sense of meaning, and connectedness with others and nature (Nasr, 1997).
Among the important aims of Islamic spirituality is providing the answer for the question pertaining to the permanent nature of man and his needs. All men who are born and living in this world are in the state of seeking the answer for the quest of meaning. To answer this quest, Nasr (1999) in his other work elaborated that, “This quest for meaning, which is as essential as the need for food and shelter is in reality the quest for the ultimate, for the Absolute, and it is as permanent need of man as his need for nourishment.” In addition to that, Islamic spirituality is also aimed to balance the outer and inner pursuits of man. In this respect, Islamic spirituality promotes the purification of the heart and safeguarding it from any affliction, thus establishing the end product that is the correct and harmonious relationship between man and his Creator. Both religion and spirituality have an impact on human wellness such as the integration the body, mind and spirit; also provide psychological and physical benefits. Both religion and spirituality emphasizes search for meaningfulness in one’s life. It is worth to mention here that all followers of religions in Malaysia do share more similarities with each other rather than differences.

Every follower regardless of religions in this world seeks the ethical traits as the highest pursuit with the world of discipline, world of peace, world of tolerance, world of respect and compassions, world of justice and dignity among human beings. We truly dream of the world where we are highly tolerant of our opinions whether we agree to agree or agree to disagree. It is unequivocally true that not pretty much difference we could find between the ethical hierarchies and trait of all religions in this world. For example, all religions indeed would necessitate a leader to duly serve justice and restore the morality into the world affairs. In this respect, humanity is seen as the religion for all human beings. One fact we can glean from the Islamic history where Prophet Muhammad PBUH had welcomed and legitimized the Christians and Jews citizenship so as to be a part of Madinah Al-Munawwarah’s entities as long as they were in the border of constitution agreed (Faisal Ahmad Shah, 2013). This verdict was absolutely unprecedented, yet the Prophet could rule out such universal decision due to his zeal of humanity that perceives people from other religions as human beings that constitute significance to the world solidarity and peace. As in the Chapter 3, verse 64 in the Quran, it affirmed that Christians and Jews were guaranteed with religious liberty and fundamental rights such as freedom of movement, property ownership, mutual solidarity and defense, as well as the principles of justice and equality before the law. Indeed the Prophet came as a mercy to the whole mankind; thus in the constitution of Madinah. Prophet declared that all of the people in Madinah regardless of any religions are one ummah.
In addition to that, several researches on inter-faith dialogue among religions in Malaysia have highlighted the importance of finding the common ground and similarities between religions. Living in tolerance and harmony regardless of religions is one of the main foundations taught in Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. This principle is stated in the al-Quran for Muslims, Udana-Varga for Buddhists, Bible for Christians, and Mahabharata for Hindus. (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 2013).

**Current Concern In Malaysian Higher Learning Institution In Plural Society**

As known by the mass, education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). National Philosophy of Education (NPE) in Malaysia has been always advocating the idea of balance among students as a kingdom within self and as an entity that can contribute to the harmony of the society. This philosophical ideology also is plausible to be read with the essences of *Rukun Negara* as it is to achieve a greater unity of all people and to maintain a democratic way of life (Syamsul Nor Azlan, 2014). Meanwhile, the Delors’s Report was submitted to UNESCO to conceptualize the pillars of learning in 21st century which are learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be (Saw, 2013) in which these propositions are very much relevant for educational arena to equip students with interfaith literacy as a humanizing factor of education for understanding world better despite of encountering diversity in many dimensions.

As in the context of higher educational arena, university is indeed a noble institution that has been upholding the responsibility to educate man with all kind of knowledge for better development of nation and global with reference made to reach the deepest meaning of one’s life (Dzulkifli, 2017). Historically speaking, the emergence of the universities in the medieval era had a strong religious influence. Nalanda in India and al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez, Morocco were established to meet the religious needs and social-culture of its society.
As highlighted by John Henry Newman quoted from Chang Da et al. (2015), “Education must not be disjoined from religion, despite believing that a university is responsible for intellectual education, and practically inseparable from the church which functioned as some form of check-and-balance to the university.”

Having admitted that religious and spiritual principles and practices have made significant impacts to many aspects of human being as individual or as member in the society, it is not enough now for university leaders to just merely accommodate religious and spiritual diversity in the academy, but it must follow with strategic action plans to showcase how do religion and spirituality enhance the education for students. University leaders and managers at HLs need to be mindful that every single student who comes to university is in the process of discovering what it means to be in community as they also develop their own worldview. Members of different religions among the students must be well-nurtured to respect both the similarities and differences between religions and to treat others regardless of faiths as they too would like to be treated. In this case, students who develop a sense of respecting others during this critical time of their development can later play a vital role in the building of a more stable and inclusive civil society.

Contextualizing the roles of higher learning institutions (HLIs) in promoting unity in religious and spiritual diversity in Malaysia, there are some aspects of education can be intervened in order to bring this mission celebrated. The said aspects are institutional philosophy, academic leadership as well as curriculum and extra curriculum design. The framework of this is perceived from the lens of academics to educate students to be the interfaith literate as to live harmoniously in plural society and interfaith leaders who are justly competent in making decisions in determining the lives of the mass that hold diverse values in life. Here are the ideas that can be considered for pursuing this mission:

a) The Practice of Soulful Education as the Institutional Philosophy

Realizing that the initiative of uniting the souls of diverse community does need the right foundation before the implementation of education is made; the philosophy of soulful education must be established and practiced in the first place. The rationale of having this idea as the cardinal principle of educating students is that soul as the main component of human spirituality makes conscious of our existence and all that exist around us (Pereira,
Teaching and learning in 21st century should be envisioning for more soulful trajectories to accomplish the outcome of learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together (Saw, 2013). This is because the current system that is seemed to be mechanistic and materialistic has created divides spiritually, socially and ecologically as a whole. The problems aroused is potentially be catered if education is ready to give a room to focus more on heart development without neglecting other aspects of human development comprehensively and by that, it is only attainable to unite people with different religious beliefs as the approach of teaching by heart has made the heart of the people taught to be open, understanding and tolerant with people around.

Apparently, the study of self could lead the truest understanding about the internal aspect of other physical creations (Nasr, 2010). Imperatively, going back to the basic principle where justice and injustice begins and ends within self, thus the perfection of soul possessed by a man has become the indicator of all occurrences happened in this world. Jusoh (2011) underpins that qalb is created as the generator or determinant of humans’ conducts. According to Skille (2010), Imam Al-Ghazali conceptualizes the qualities that dwell together in man’s nature gather in the spiritual heart. There are bestial, predatory and rational faculties. The soulful education underpinned in this context as a verb to ensure those heart faculties are nurtured accordingly. Those qualities should be put at the mean scale where the bestial will bloom out to be temperance (iffah), predatory will turn out to be courage (shajaah), rational leads to wisdom (hikmah) and the totality of those attainments will amount to justice (adalah) (Skillie, 2010; Al-Attas & Wan Mohd Daud, 2014). With the balanced attainment of Qalb’s attributes, the nobility of heart will elevate humans above the beast from baseness to angelic state (Hasan Langgulung, 1987).

Education centring on soul is perhaps being helpful to lock the main key of balance relationship between the students to themselves and between them to others and other creations. This fundamental principle of interconnectedness put forth here is seen as the first step for educators to shape the balance and harmonious students at their individual level and by then, they are capable of establishing balance relationship to others. In the context of uniting people with religious and spiritual diversity, this metaphysical foundation is highlighted through educational philosophy of institution as so the other dimension of effort in the mission of uniting people can be made easier because the their hearts are connected in the first place.
b) Demonstration of Right Notion of Academic Leadership and Right Example in University Ecosystem

According to Lennan (2005), what makes leadership a mechanism of unity is because leadership concerns intrinsic goals that promote continuity and change of effort, leadership also relates with ethical consideration in which the subject matters of these relationship pertains God and humanity, and leadership can be denoted as authority in which it supposed to learn and teach at the same. From other dimension, it is worth to mention here that university needs to make a serious effort to establish a right notion of academic leadership. The understanding of academic leadership needs to be nurtured from day one of academics joining the higher learning institutions. It is a must to shape and mould the minds of academics in realizing their roles and impacts within a bigger picture. These individuals need to have right and true intention, clear and objective vision on his or her involvement and participation in all academic and non-academic activities in the institutions. They need to know that each and every action done by them at the institutions can motivate and influence the people surrounding them particularly the students. Therefore, they need to always be aware that they must demonstrate the right exemplary characters that are based on true accountability and responsibility that are universally acceptable by all religious ethics or virtues.

In this respect, their roles in teaching interfaith literacy must be seen as the deontological action of civilized the nation. They need to display a positive academic leadership identity that will be an example to contemplate. The internal values that could enhance one individual’s core values such as Qalb-Guided Leadership, Human Governance, Academic Ethics and Integrity, Rigorous Intellectualism, Self-leadership and Identity Construction need to be continuously nurtured to all academics. To bring this creativity to bear, we must live our faith and exercise leadership in a way that is based on authentic discernment of the tradition and is attuned to the contemporary context (Lennan, 2005).

More than that, academics must expose themselves with the right ideas and values on managing solidarity and diversity both in the university and outside the university. They need to exhibit an understanding of what is meant by diversity in HLI in a global 21st century. They also need to support greater teamwork and atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding in their respective university while discovering strategies in which a diverse
and inclusive academic community will result in value-add to the HLE experience. It is believed that the right achievement of academic leadership will seamlessly create a greater achievement in managing the religious and spiritual diversity so as to bring about a peaceful nation to the whole mankind at large.

c) Promoting Interfaith Dialogues in Campus

Interfaith dialogue is the best way in making mutual understanding between the different faith, race, ethnic and others especially in Malaysia (Zakaria & Zain, 2012). Al-Hammadi (2008) condones that dialogue happens in harmonious way with the pursuit of reaching truth. This is contradicting to the notion of debate, in which debate seeks for establishing championship as one has intention to defeat others (Faisal Ahmad Shah, 2013). The symbiosis between the two is that all debate is dialogue, yet not all dialogue is debate. As HLIs are where knowledge is pursued and propagated (Munif Zariruddin, 2017), they are subject to the obligation of playing role in initiating and promoting the interfaith understanding among students.

Oftentimes, religious and spiritual values are strongly recommended to be a common medium in solving the global problems and issues encountered by human beings universally. All followers of all religions need to articulate their respective religious and spiritual values through interfaith dialogue purposely to educate people to compromise differences and build the basis of mutual understanding as a trajectory to minimize the misunderstanding we have towards the other religions that has been become the root of the divides all this time. In this respect, observance of universal values, ethical principles and moderate attitudes towards differences, respect for human rights and inclusiveness as well as unity in diversity are among the main destinies of inter-faith or intra-faith dialogue (Lee Wei Chang et al., 2013).

Besides the common values as the cardinal rule, experts in the study of comparative religion have highlighted the common concerns raised among all followers of the religions. Those common concerns are the loss of family values, extremism, lack of multi-faith education, environmental degradation, and lack of spirituality and the death of good governance (Ahmad Munawar Ismail et al., 2012). Thus, religious and spiritual principles are believed as the main defender and shield to protect individual and society from these common concerns.
Conclusion

In conclusion, we are all the same regardless of our external identities manifested through our nationality, religions and cultures. The pursuit of humanity and justice that none of us are less interested should have become the religious tenet everyone should embrace. We may be practicing the different set of rituals to manifest righteousness based on our respective religious beliefs, yet spirituality makes us indistinguishable where it appeals us approaching our heart into the deepest level and more profoundly. By having this quality, the common grounds in religious and spiritual diversity can be made attainable, thus the world of peace and just are duly served. In relation with this pursuit, this move should be pioneered by higher learning institutions played by academics to educate students. The preliminary efforts like establishing soulful education as the institutional philosophy, demonstrating of right academic leadership and example characters and promoting interfaith dialogue in campus are believed to unlock the students to be more open, tolerant, soulful, balanced, compassion and respectful by enforcing the inculcation of religious and spiritual values learning in diverse educational settings.

References


