

FREEDOM OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES:

An Insight from Islamic Perspective

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Introduction

First of all, I would like to extend my gratitude to the World Jewish Congress, and in particular its Deputy Secretary General, my good friend Mr. Maram Stern, for inviting me to such a great assembly. I feel that I am really honored and delighted to meet so many leaders and figures of the Jewish community from all over the world.

As a Muslim and President of the oldest and largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah, I view that it is important that our respective religions, Judaism and Islam, and together with Christianity, in particular, need to work together in order to solve the problems of human civilization. This is because of the three religions --often categorized as revealed religions and Abrahamic religions—are based on God’s revelations, with their very mission is to establish peace and mercy to human being. As revealed religions, I believe that Judaism and Islam maintain the same view on freedom of religion, because God The Creator had created man with his intrinsic-fundamental-primordial right, that is the freedom of belief --wether to believe or not to believe in God, or freedom of religion that is that human being has ultimate freedom to embrace or choose a particular religion.

Yet, this very basic human right is now challenged and threatenned by fanaticism and extreemism stemmed from a communalistic orientation of believers. Coinciding with state’s intervention, the violation against freedom of religious practices has become a serious threat to human civilization.

When an obscure, outrageous video aimed at discrediting a religion’s holiest of figures recently evoked another worldwide rage --from brutal attacks, violent protests, to peaceful condemnations-- which reminds us of similar previous highly-publicized controversies over anti-Islam films and cartoons

during the last decade, it is imperative to ponder what has really happened in our globalized world, what lessons we have truly learned from these incidents, and what we have been doing so far or what we would greatly need to do to deal with such deadly incidents and disturbing tensions.

Similarly, when the Fourteenth Plenary Assembly of the World Jewish Congress to be held in Budapest, 5-7 May 2013, a group of people protested with no reasonable slogans, clearly shows that anti-Semitism is not yet died, but even resurges with more than a religious motive, but includes a political sentiment.

What is at the heart of this rage and protest? Have our civilizations been in clash? Is it another instance of clash of freedoms --particularly between freedom of speech and freedom to exercise religion? Or, a clash between religion and liberty? Is it merely another misunderstanding caused by the difference in social values and fueled by certain political intentions? Has been the world moving away from peace? If so, what can we do?

The factors involved might be more complex than what we could imagine. This complexity is also reflected in the diverse opinions present in the debates over the film and what should be done about it. However, it might be quite clear that the recent case indicates that it is not merely the freedom of expression itself which created the tension, rather (extreme) hate toward the (religiously) 'others' which hides behind the freedom of expression, and behind any opposition to (extreme) freedom of expression. Hate and the hateful reaction to it, coupled by misunderstandings, have proven to be very destructive. This is one of the biggest threats toward freedom, mainly freedom of religion, but in fact also freedom of expression itself.

It is hate toward the people who are different --either in terms of belief, ethnicity, nationality, or others-- that has often been the crux of the problems related to the perceived clash between 'religion' and 'freedom'.

One needs not to assume that religion and liberty/freedom are always in conflict. Both can be reconciled and might even enhance each other. Liberty can provide the context within which religion can play a greater role in people's life. On the other hand, religion --with its strong justification and

motivation, as well its adherents – might significantly help people obtain liberty. Liberty, once people achieve it, can be best described as a means toward a higher end-- which is, for most people, value and morality. Meanwhile religion itself can have positive social impact necessary for obtaining liberty.

At the international levels, there are series of regulation consists of prohibition on religious intolerance, blasphemy and the like. However, we should also recognize, analyze and address the existing challenges, problems and dilemmas with regard to safeguarding fundamental rights and liberties – spanning from hate speech, hate crime, extreme ideologies, violent extremism, gender discrimination, marginalization of minorities, to racism and ethnic discrimination. In addition, we should note that reconciling religion and freedom/liberty is an easy task. It has even been the most difficult task most nations have faced.

The question is how to build mutual relationships between religion and freedom of expression? A very simple answer is building a culture of dialogue that involves competence of listening, knowing, understanding and accepting differences. It requires one step action where people need to go beyond their cultural and religious barriers. A high level of understanding on the origin of religions could have people to grasp the substantive meaning of religion. Likewise, religion people need to have an open mind to see culture, not solely from its observable expression but value underneath. Appreciation on culture is essential to avoiding or reducing language gap between religion and freedom.

Failure to understand the language of religion and freedom could lead to quantification of religion. People are trapped with numbers such as majority and minority. The perception of majority could lead to superiority arrogance that caused alienation of minorities. Security and justice are still luxurious matters for minority groups elsewhere in the globe. Existence of minority is very frequently less-counted because of generalization and “efficiency” in decision making processes.

In the future the world needs to build a culture of tolerance rather than series of regulations and formal sanctions. The world requires “cross boarder” that bridge the gap between religion and freedom.

Freedom of Religion

Indeed, freedom of religion is an intrinsic and inherent right of human being. It is a given and innate capacity from God, not from the state, or any other parties. If Universal Declaration of Human Rights has provided a basis for freedom of religion, and International Covenant on Social and Political Rights has emphasized the very basis of freedom of religion as well as freedom of expression, still they cannot decrease values of that freedom. Legal instruments, such as UN Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief (1981), are good enough, but all should make them better known and abide by them. “Law is easier to proclaim than to enforce”.

What are the restrictions which are “permissible” on the freedom to manifest religion or conscience? (these restrictions should be prescribed by law and should be aimed at protecting public safety, order, health, morals, fundamental rights and freedom of others), what about national security

An Islamic Perspective

Religion is a *fitra*, an innate natural disposition. In this sense, every human being would naturally or greatly need to embrace a religion or something similar to it. In the Holy Scripture God has declared “*it is your freedom, either you believe or not to believe*”.

In fact, one can find an emphasis on freedom – including freedom of religion – in religious doctrines themselves. In Islam for instance, it is emphasized that “*Let there be no compulsion in religion*” (Q 2: 256). A recommended response or attitude toward people who have different beliefs is to declare that “*For you is your religion, and for me is my religion*” (Q 109: 6). It is implied in the Qur’an that plurality of religions is natural (Q 2: 148, 10: 99). Not only people can choose which religion they embrace, they are also free to decide not to embrace any religion. People are free to believe or

disbelieve. It is stated in the Qur'an that, "... *whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve ...*" (Q 18: 29). To disregard other religions is also prohibited. It is stated for instance that, "*Do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge*" (Q 6: 108). Even to those who follow a different faith tradition and once disrespected yourself, you should not be unjust to them (Q 5: 6).

Historically, however, despite theological differences between the two religions, people tend to disregard good relationships between them. Islam is not a religion that is anti-Judaism. Instead, both Islam, Christianity and Judaism are monotheistic religions. Believe in the Torah and Bible is one of basic tenet of Islam. Relationships between Muslims and Jewish people during Prophet Muhammad era and nowadays are generally good.

Religion and Multiculturalism

We are now living in multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. No single society that is monolithic. All great cultural and religious traditions have to deal with plurality and diversity of cultures and religions. These pluralities are both given and generation. As mentioned in many verses of the Qur'an, God created mankind into tribes and races with different skin colors and languages. Plurality of religions is also a part of God's Will. Indeed, plurality is observable signs or evidence of God Almighty for intellectuals, knowledgeable persons.

Cultural and religious plurality becomes more complex in line with development and interactions between people from different faiths and cultures. Plurality is resulted from creativity and adaptation of people to cope with realities, changes and challenges. A plausible consequence of these creativity and adaptation is the birth of ideologies across human history. Now, variety of multiculturalism, pluralism and other ideologies have become major studies of modern social sciences especially sociology and anthropology.

In line with this principle, Islam views religious and cultural plurality not simple as a co-existence. It entails a world view and code of conducts on

how to see plurality and to deal with accordingly. Historically, there was an example of *umma* on the ground, that is the Medina Community. This community is based on the Medina Charter (*mitsaq al madinah*) as a consensus among people. There are three characteristics of Medina Charter. The first, Medina Charter is not based on a particular religion (Islam) but on universal teaching and values of existing religions especially Christianity and Judaism. Second, every single community, ethnic and religion is entitled as *umma*. Therefore none of them are excluded or alienated. The third, the Charter did not abandon the existence and identity of religions, ethnics and tribes but they are highly respected and well-protected. As could be seen from history, under Medina Charter every religion, tribe and ethnic lived in conformity, harmony and unity.

The Current Issues and Threats

According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life findings, published in September 2012, government restrictions on religion and social hostilities toward religions (including Sikhism, Islam, Baha'ism, Zoroaster, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, indigenous religions) are rising, in the world, in the Middle East, in Asia, Europe, also in the U.S.

Government Restrictions, Discriminatory laws and policies against certain faith-based and non-faith based individuals and minority groups (banning particular faiths or sects, prohibiting voluntary conversions, limiting preaching, giving preferential treatment to religious groups). For example, the 2009 constitutional referendum in Switzerland banning the construction of minarets on mosques.

Social hostilities, harassment of specific groups; individuals and social groups that either act as the state apparatus, play not by the rule of law, or violate common ethics. For example, Mob or sectarian violence, harassment over attire for religious reasons, and other religion-related intimidation or abuse. Propaganda or advocacy of religious, racial hatred that incite discrimination, hostility or violence.

International groups and networks which do not operate according to the prevailing international laws (UN, and others). For example, international

terrorist networks and like-minded hard-liners remain a threat in some countries.

Complexity of today's world reality has brought about new issues and problems, such terrorism, violence, radicalism, extremism, blasphemy, anti-Semitism, Islamo-phobia, conversion, justice and equality. These problems coincided with other issues or claims in certain national spheres, such as an "Islamic state", "Muslim majority country", "Western Country", a country with a religion is a state religion, an official religion, a country with followers comprise the majority.

Another main issue today is how to ease tensions between religious law, national law, and international law. How to address the claims of superiority or inferiority of religions when these are linked to the violation. This can be added with the still contentious issues: abortion, contraception, the building of houses/places of worship, humanitarian or charitable institutions, conversion, religious mission, religious figures and symbols in the public places (cross, turban, hijab, etc), dietary regulations, religious publications and distribution, religious education, religious holidays and days of rest, preaching and communications, the use of particular religious languages in the public.

Listing these issues above may well bring our attention to a broader scope of religious practices. That is that religious practices do not confine to worship in the houses of worship, but rather exercising all religious values and teachings in all spheres of life.

What Need to be Done?

Shared Security

An agenda to be developed in order to enact freedom of religion and to develop cooperation among religions is to bring about collective consciousness on the importance of shared security. The notion of "shared security" implies that security is a collective public good. The Kyoto Declaration highlights "the collective responsibility of all people to meet our common need for security." The notion of "shared security" emphasises that the security of the people, of human being, should be at the centre of

attention. Similar to the notion of human security, “shared security” also requires a comprehensive understanding of security in terms of the matrix of human rights and needs. More importantly, “shared security” requires the involvement of all stake-holders to defend and advance human dignity. In this regard, religious traditions clearly provide the foundation for such undertaking.

Shared security can be achieved only if we agree on the importance of understanding security as an attempt to “acknowledge our common vulnerabilities and our shared responsibility to address them.” Shared security cannot be achieved unless we understand each other’s (in) security concerns. Most dialogues among civilizations, or between different faiths, often ignore or avoid the importance of this point. Focusing such dialogues on issues of commonalities is certainly useful to promote greater mutual understanding. However, it does not provide a complete understanding on the sources of tension between communities or between civilizations. It is equally importance to understand each other’s insecurity. This should be an agenda in inter-faith dialogues, both at local, national, and global levels.

Shared Ethical Values

Another agenda needs to be undertaken is to develop shared ethical values among people of different faiths. Religions may differ from each other, especially in theology, but at the same time they share the same ethical values, especially with regard to human dignity, human liberty, and betterment of human’s life. The Abrahamic religions, for example, maintain the notion of man’s very mission as vicegerent of God on earth, and therefore he needs to achieve the highest status of human being that is to become the perfect man.

Emphasizing the ethical dimension of religion will lead believers to have a meeting of mind, a common ground for coexistence, cohabitation, and cooperation. A believer in this perspective comes out with an ethical value that religion is from God but for human being and humanity. By so doing believers will capitalize similarities, rather than differences between religions. It is the time for believers to find a common word in order to face common enemies. The enemies are not the people of different religions, but

rather the problems of human being and humanity, such as poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, injustice, environmental destruction, etc.

Interfaith dialogue

Religious leaders have taken very active role in promoting inter-faith dialogues as a means to advocate peace. Indeed, the proliferation of both state-driven and society-driven inter-faith dialogues at regional and global level over the last decade signifies the growing involvement and participation of religious leaders and communities to avert the nightmare scenario of Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations.”

In this regard, religions clearly speak the language of peace. We should never surrender even though the challenges to our efforts to spread the message of peace are increasingly becoming more and more difficult. Indeed, proliferation of dialogues among civilizations seems to have not completely removed the danger. The flurry of inter-faith dialogues, both state-driven and society-driven, seems to have generated little success in removing the prejudices, misconceptions, and misunderstanding, hate, and hatred among religious groups.

Furthermore, there have been efforts to enhance peace among the followers of different religions through interfaith programs and activities. There have been even interfaith dialogues and cooperation intended to address social problems, such as poverty, human rights abuse, corruption and environmental degradation. Interfaith partnership for the common good has been on the rise in the last decade, involving more and more religious leaders and activists.

This reality clearly points to the imperative of not only doing more, but also doing it right. So much has been done to address the problem. But, progresses have not been entirely satisfactory. However, it would be misleading also to claim that the ongoing initiatives on inter-faith dialogues or dialogues among civilizations are no more than pointless exercises. These dialogues to create a greater space for mutual learning process. They expand the boundary of mutual understanding among people from different religious and civilizational background. They create the imperative of enhanced interaction among people from different faith. Dialogues have

also opened up more opportunities for closer cooperations and communities to address problems of humanity and for the betterment of the society.

It is the time for religious communities, to launch collective consciousness to develop coexistence, cohabitation, and cooperation, based on the multiculturalism, stand against racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Christianism, and anti-Semitism..