

PLURALISM AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: In the Malaysian government outline of Vision 2020, the importance of the study of religion as an integral component of general education is explicitly stated. This paper examines the present state of comparative religious studies in Malaysian Institutes of Higher Learning. Several philosophical issues are highlighted including the local concept and objective of religious studies, suitability of courses offered, and its relevance to the national development, i.e., industrialization of the country. An attempt is made to suggest how the religious course in a plural society like Malaysia, in the future, can be used to achieve Vision 2020 by integrating science and religion based on the position that science is a problem-solving activity.

Keywords: philosophy, multi religious, courses, pluralism, change, comparative.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multi religious, multicultural and multiethnic country in Southeast Asia. Religion is observed beyond rituals and festivals. In a Malaysian daily life, be it economical, social or political, having a religious justification is a value added 'capital'. For instance, religious considerations are given for classification of food and beverages at the supermarkets. Even though it is constitutionally a secular state, religion is not at all peripheral. It has been argued that Malaysia is always in the 'state of stable tension', because of its fundamental pluralism and the significant way religion and all of its aspects are treated in the country.¹

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¹ Shamsul A.B. (2000). "Why Malaysia is not disintegrating? Islam, the economy and politics in multiethnic Malaysia". Text of a talk for Asia Center Lecture, Harvard University, April 21

It is in the above broad context that the author wishes to highlight the sensitivities of the religious dimension in Malaysia and by extension, the problems related to its future development. In particular, the author intends to examine the current status of comparative religious study imposed by the Ministry of Education and raise some philosophical issues simply because it is the only required course on religion that must be taken by all university students. There are other university courses on religion but issues of sensitivities do not arise because of its elective nature and more often than not, these are taken and conducted by followers of the same religion. For examples, any course on Islam offered by the Faculty of Islamic Studies to Muslim students does not pose any sensitive issue because the instructor is addressing followers of the same faith. Such is not the case in conducting comparative religious courses whereby all students, irrespective of their religion, have to enroll in it. There are some philosophical issues involved which must be addressed accordingly to enhance its future development amidst the noble vision of the country, known as Vision 2020, and the aforementioned 'state of stable tension'.

INDIGENOUS CONCEPT

Malaysians are currently experiencing the spirit not unlike the renaissance although at a much humble scale. The whole thrust of Vision 2020 is encapsulated in the national slogan 'Sure we can (*Malaysia Boleh*)', which is not a far cry from Battiste's "Man can do anything if they will".² At one end of the vision is the consensus of upholding traditional values and on the other is the zeal for a completely transformed industrialized society based on the advancement of S & T. The place of religion, and with it religious studies, is somewhere in between. The Vision states: "The fifth challenge that we have always faced is the challenge of establishing a matured liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colors and creeds are free to practice and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation" (Mahathir Mohamad 1992, 2).

² Mahathir Mohamad (1992). "Malaysia: The Way Forward", in *The Journal of Malaysian Institute of Management*. Vol. 27, No.3, pp.1-9. All references of Vision 2020 are taken from this text

Within the spirit of Vision 2020, this quantum leap from an agro based society to that of an industrial one has several intrinsic values that we can examine from several perspectives; namely - economics, anthropological and sociological, the ethos of reformation, scientism and lastly but certainly not the least, the naturalization of Nature. Underlying all these themes is the growing innate belief in the Malaysian mind concerning change- that one either changes or be changed. Religion is utilized in monitoring these fundamental changes, as the author will try to demonstrate in the following brief discussion.

For example, let us consider the economics perspective. Before the implementation of the National Economic Policy, there is a widespread belief in the masses, regardless of their religion, that they do not have control over the surrounding. They are fully immersed in nature and ultimately subservient to the whims of the unseen. They don't have control over the traditional factors of production - capital, entrepreneur, land and labor. More importantly, they do not even have control over themselves. To live to its entirety is to live according to nature and that means to accept things as it is- the equivalent of the *Dao* and *Taqdir* – that each individual is only a insignificant manifestation of nature. Consequently, the natural thing to do is to live in harmony with nature, not stoically where reasoning defines what is rational and what is not, but in full submission to the occult forces.

On the contrary, the Vision 2020 men do not see themselves succumbing to the mercy of the occult. If the factory is not profitable, it is not caused by any psychic forces. Rather, accountability goes to the manager himself. It is not the case of the carpenter blaming his tool; he has only himself to blame. From the Christian outlook, this is not unlike that of the Protestant ethics. If seen from the Islamic viewpoint, what will be emphasize is the *qadariyyah* school of thought, the view that 'in order for the world to change, it is man that has to change' stretched to the extreme. And from the values embedded in *wu wei*, a fundamental component of Daoism, man has to repeatedly practice solving a problem until it reaches perfection. All in all, man holds the key to his worldly salvation and not any super or supra natural being.

From the anthropological and sociological perspective, the pre-Vision 2020 man is not very interested in change, as much as in maintaining the *status quo*. The past defines the future; thus the future is not deterministic at all. On the contrary, the Vision 2020 man is more interested in the present and the future than the past chiefly

because the past is not changeable; what is done is done. It is the future that is important and man, by definition, is *the* agent of change. The Vision 2020 man is not interested in myths and legends, irrespective whether they are biblical or not. It is irrelevant that these stories might be true or false, what is relevant is that they are not changeable. Progress implicates moving forward or 'moving on'. It is inherent in the future and it is plain impossible that one can progress backward. Thus the 2020 men are only interested in changeable events. The past, as they say, is certainly not the future. The future is the peak of the mountain. Confucius says one thousand steps begin from one step and for every high mountain, there is a higher mountain. We progress by climbing these mountains.

The future, in turn, cannot be understood if men do not have the capacity to explain and predict. This does not mean that Malaysians should adopt inductivism or positivism *per se*. The pre-Vision 2020 man explains phenomena by appealing to supernatural entities. The world out there is saturated with a multitude of ever powerful supernatural beings. The belief of the pre-Vision 2020 man is deeply entrenched in hermeneutics- there is not an iota of phenomena on earth which is not orchestrated by the heavens. The Vision 2020 man, on the contrary, views nature as a completely manageable entity. Man and his activities, as an integral part of nature, is likewise explainable and predictable. Human activities are transparent and can be understood in a naturalistic way. These explanations do not require a priori belief in the existence of super naturals. This is not to say that Vision 2020 men deny their existence at all; what they categorically deny is the relevance of the super naturals in explaining and predicting human successes or failures. Moreover, Vision 2020 men would believe that there is not a single human activity that can escape a naturalistic explanation. It is due to our ignorance that we fail to identify the natural causes and attribute it to the occult.

Just as the rising and setting of the sun is predictable, so is human conduct. According to Vision 2020, our inability to predict stem not from the existence of something mystical in man, but it is due mainly to our insufficient knowledge about human nature and this shortcoming can only be addressed through human effort. In short, while complete knowledge rest with God, Who is the Most Knowledgeable, man, through his effort, can reach the truth about itself. Is it not the case that man is the vice-gerent of God and is created in His image?

The epitome of Vision 2020 man is the unshaken faith in science. It is explicitly stated in the Vision that: “The sixth is the challenge of establishing a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilization of the future” (Mahathir Mohamad. 1992).

While the pre-Vision 2020 men have a very deep seated belief in religious tradition, where truth resides with the religious establishment, owned and prescribed by them, the industrialized men consider traditions as nothing more than social consensus. Truth is socially constructed, and man by definition is a social animal. Kuhn is right when he argues for the existence of paradigms and the most that man can do is to shift paradigm. While ascertaining progress is quite problematic for Kuhn because of the incompatibility of paradigm, the industrialized men believe that progress is indeed measurable- the Vision itself is the cornerstone as well as the yardstick for progress. Progress in turn is achieved when problems are solved scientifically and more importantly, the Vision 2020 man views science as a problem-solving activity, to the end of ‘*establishing a scientific and progressive society*’ quoted earlier . Science solves problems, be it economics, political, psychological, sociological, ethics, as well as religion.³

Due to its large scale impact on the society, neither is science monopolized nor dominated by any particular group of religious tradition. The advancement of science in Malaysia involves the whole sections of the society. According to Vision 2020, it should be a mass movement, a scientific awakening, with a single purpose of constructing an industrialized society. There is an irreversible transformation in their mind about the concept of change; it becomes an innate quest of life. Change is perceived as ‘to be alive’. Consequently, those who are not ready or *trying* to change, passively watching the wheels of life from a distance, are in fact acting unnaturally. To participate in change is to do an act that is in total conformity to human nature, while the passive act is one that violates human nature. It might be argued here that it is impossible for any human to act unnaturally since men *qua* men are natural being. Even

³ The argument that science is a problem solving activity is well known in the writing of Karl Popper. See for example his writings in Miller, D. (ed.) (1985). *Popper Selections*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

the most passive act springs from some motive in the individual, the agent of change, and if the agent is a human being, then the act must spring forth from something in human nature. In response to this argument, one can say that the view that to change is to act in conformity to human nature implies that every act done by a human being is a subset of change; passivity included. Passivity than is not 'not changing'- it is the 'absence of change'. Thus what is natural is change or in other words, change is more fundamental than passivity. Accordingly, to strive for change as explicitly stated in the Vision 2020 *i.e.* the quest for an industrialized society is perfectly in line with realizing 'the natural act'.

Where than is the place of religion or in more specific terms, how would religion facilitates this transition from an agro based Malaysian society to that of an industrial one? This is a significant question because the future of religious study, at least in Malaysia, hinges upon the perceived role of religion in constructing the society of Vision 2020. In order to answer this question, we must consider at least two religions in Malaysia, *i.e.*, Islam and Christianity.

The ethos of feudalism still encapsulates the Muslim Malay man on the street and moderation in everything is the absolute rule, rather than merely a fallible, regulative principle. This extreme conservative attitude is not strong enough to spur them for radical change in any direction. The received view, that Islam is moderation and moderation is Islam, is stretched to the maximum. This view is not unlike the popular Confucian doctrine that truth lies in the middle. It explains why Islam is perceived more as a philosophy, for a lack of better word, than a religion with comprehensive prescriptions.

Unlike the Malays who have formal religious institutions having judiciary and legislative power, Hindu, Buddhists and Christians alike, as it is, depend on their religious organizations for arbitrating religious matters. Each of these religions does not have a single, pervasive, monolithic trend. For example, the Shaitvya is popular in Malaysia yet it does not have complete support from the Hindu masses. Similarly the Buddhist Mahayanas is loosely connected. Putting the differences aside, the common thing that they shared is that the content of their religious education, and with it religious studies, are very traditional. In addition to the theological aspect and the unending focus on ethics and morality, little if any is related to the mission of industrializing the country. The emphasis on these 'humanistic' aspects are carried over to the compulsory comparative religious course currently offered at the

institutes of higher learning. It is to this course that we will now turn to.

COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS COURSES

The Government has introduced a compulsory course on comparative civilization study entitled Islamic and Asian Civilization which has a religious component. The course stemmed from several preceding intellectual discourses, focusing on Civilization Dialogue, at the national and international levels. The realization of Vision 2020 is the overriding *raison d'être* of the course, with the following several minor objectives:

1. To examine civilization concepts from various perspectives
2. To address the students popular misunderstandings of Islam and other religions
3. To instill greater appreciation of world civilizations and to acknowledge the unique contributions of each
4. To expose to the students the similarities and differences of various worldviews
5. As a compulsory complementary course in order to avoid over-specialization. The students should not know more and more about less and less.

A course evaluation was carried out recently. Standard questionnaires were given and interviews were conducted to student leaders of each university taking into account the individual curriculum of the comparative religious course.⁴ The outcome of the studies highlight two practical problems related to the future of comparative religious studies in the country. These are:

1. The religious content are quite superficial, it does not always reflect the deep underlying religious values. Accordingly the students are unable to internalize the philosophical dimensions of the various religions.
2. The course does not relate explicitly to problem-solving, what more of solving problems scientifically.

⁴ See *Laporan Kajian Program Pengajian Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia di IPTA, UKM, 17 Julai 2000*

TENTATIVE SOLUTION

The first problem stemmed from insufficient time allocated. First, there is simply not much material that can be covered in a 4 unit comparative course. What the students lose in depth they gain in breadth. So the only possible solution is by either increasing the number of units or simply offering higher level courses covering each religion. With respect to the first solution, it could not be easily carried out because of the minimum 100 unit requirement and the never ending emphasis on core courses by the faculties. The second solution posed another problem because a higher level course will just be classified as an elective. Not many students will take it because of its apparent non-commercial value.

In our opinion, more can be done with regard to the second problem. The key to the solution is by organically connecting science to religion, philosophically and historically that is, rather than merely presenting religion as a standard component of any civilization. The highlights of the comparative course would then be on religion, science and civilization instead of civilization or religion proper.

The philosophical treatment for the organic relationship between science and religion, in particular the relationship between scientific and religious problems in Chinese and Indian civilizations is yet to be constructed.⁵ For the purpose of this paper, let us take two comparative cases from other civilizations as illustrations. They are deeply religious personalities yet their literary scientific contributions are undisputed. They are the scientists, Abu Raihan al-Biruni (942-1057A.D), and the icon of western science, Isaac Newton (1642-1727).

Abu Raihan al-Biruni

Much has been written on al-Biruni but little have been said about his philosophy of problem solving and his views concerning the relationship between scientific and religious problems. Generally, al-Biruni believes that man can contemplate nature because man occupies a particular place in this world. He is at the center of the universe, the vice gerent of God. He is but the guardian of nature because man is a

⁵ Joseph Needham's *magnum opus* work on Chinese civilizations, for example, has shown without doubt the advancement of science in China. See also Helaine Selin, (ed.) (1997). *Encyclopedia of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine in Non-western Cultures* (for the development of science in India). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers

reflection of God, a theomorphic image, whose purpose of existence in this world is to become an 'integrated, complete man' (*al-insan al-kamil*). As a matter of fact, philosophy to al-Biruni can be defined as "the striving to become as much as possible similar to God"⁶ and *al-insan al-kamil* reflects all the Divine Names and Qualities, the highest station a man can be, after the fall from the edenic state (*al-insan al-qadim*). Al-Biruni's act of starting his research in *Tahdid* by quoting the Quranic verse shows the importance of contemplation to him. Contemplation in Islam from the Quranic point of view is a kind of 'knowledge that relates the knower to higher modes of being'.⁷ The scientist who contemplates reminds himself of his origin and when he reaches the station of *ihsan*, he acts for the sake of God 'without acting' for even though he does not see God' he is convinced that God sees him.

Meditating on nature involves contemplating the intricacies of nature and the divine prototypes. It means making nature an object of study, in such a manner that nature becomes a witness (*shahadah*) of the Divine Presence. When al-Biruni quotes the Quranic verse concerning 'contemplating nature', the contemplated nature is objectified. Nature is considered as an object to be studied, in order to achieve a unitized knowledge that can aid man to act upon nature, itself notwithstanding, and to climb the ladder of perfection using his 'aql. A unitized knowledge thus gained "integrates man with his own prototype as well as the prototype of Nature..." (S.H.Nasr 1975, 75)

The element of transcendence is evident in al-Biruni's outlook of nature. One of the major postulates subscribed by al-Biruni is that God creates nature continuously through the Quranic injunction of '*kun fayakun*'. God's continuous act of creation, however, does not mean that there is no 'glimpse of permanence' in nature. The repetition of the qualitative changing process of nature brought forth the appearance of eternity. Moreover, the repetition of particular problems in the history and philosophy of science attest to this element of permanency in nature. For examples, the relation of one to many, the mind/body problem, the problem of continuity and discontinuity of bodies were discussed during the time of Aristotle and even in the time of al-Biruni. The encounter of man's mind with nature, more often than not, always

⁶ See his *India*, Vol. 1, pp. 29-30. Cf. S.H. Nasr (1964). *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine*, Cambridge, p.114

⁷ For an excellent discussion on this topic, the reader can consult S.H.Nasr (1975). *Islam and the Plight of the Modern Man*. Kuala Lumpur, pp.68-77

focused on those problems. When men study and contemplate the seemingly permanent features of nature, man can explain and predict. There are universal laws of nature for man to understand for his own well being. Says al-Biruni: "I say further that man's instinct for knowledge has constantly urged him to probe the secrets of the unknown, and to explore in advance what his future conditions maybe, so that he can take the necessary precautions to ward off with fortitude the dangers and mishaps that may beset him."⁸

The laws of nature (*sunnatullah*) which in reality are "the laws of God" having different "degree of fundamentality and universality"⁹ and to which al-Biruni warrants examination, is possible because of the appearance of permanency in it. There is an esoteric utility to religion in studying nature. According to al-Biruni, nature should not be studied for the sole purpose of earning a livelihood at the expense of the here after.

In brief, a scientist, to al-Biruni, does not solve a scientific problem simply for the sake of solving problem. He does not solve a problem because the problem ought to be solved since it is technologically possible to do so. His motive of solving problems is dominated by his consciousness of seeking God's pleasure, "that which yields Him satisfaction".¹⁰ For example, in one of his book, *The Exhaustive treatise On Shadows*, we can see clearly the orientation of scientific problems expounded by al-Biruni. In studying shadows, not only did he analyze shadows of this world but also shadows in the hereafter! There is a 'revealed perspective' on scientific problems which the scientist should take into account. The scientist should always be mindful of the connection that problems have to this world and to the hereafter. The Holy Quran views the alternation of night and day, the lengthening of shadows, as signs of God that warrant examination in our quest of knowing Him, so that we will not be "blind to the realities of the life to come".¹¹ The science of astronomy to al-Biruni, for an example, has its origin from Prophet Idris.¹² These are examples of scientific problems enjoined solving in the Holy Quran and Sunnah that from al-Biruni's point of view, merit investigation.

⁸ See his *Tahdid Nihayat al-Amakin*, p.5

⁹ See Osman Bakar (1991). *Tawhid and Science: Essays on the History and Philosophy of Islamic Science*. Kuala Lumpur, pp.64-65

¹⁰ See his *India*, Vol. II, p.246; and his *Exhaustive Treatise On Shadows*, p.2

¹¹ al-Biruni quotes the Quranic verse 17:72

¹² al-Biruni, *The Exhaustive Treatise on Shadows*, Vol. I, p.230

Isaac Newton

“The whole burden of philosophy”, says Newton, “seems to consist in this: from the phenomena of motions to investigate the forces of nature, and then from these forces to demonstrate other phenomena”.¹³ The scientific problems, from Newton’s view, are problems in natural philosophy about phenomena.

Throughout Newton’s scientific endeavor, it appears that these scientific problems¹⁴ share some common and interesting traits. The most important of them all is that Newton’s scientific problems are problems which are shadowed by arguments about God. In more specific terms, scientific problems according to Newton are problems concerning nature belonging to that part of theology which is demonstrable. That God is central in his natural philosophy is clear. His discussion about God’s name and Attributes leads him to conclude:¹⁵ “And thus more concerning God, to discourse of Whom from the appearances of things does certainly belong to natural philosophy.”

To give another example, he writes the following passage in his study of optics: “And these things being rightly dispatched, does it not appear from phenomena that there is a Being, incorporeal, living, intelligent, omnipresent,...And through every true step made in this philosophy brings us not immediately to the Knowledge of the First cause, yet it brings us nearer to it, and on that account is to be highly valued.”¹⁶

As a matter of fact, God is so crucial to his philosophy of science that he declares “When I wrote my treatise about our system (that is the *Principia*) I had an eye upon such principles as might work considering men for the belief of a deity”.¹⁷ He even told Conduit that the *Principia* was written “to enforce and demonstrate the power and

¹³ See Newton’s “Preface” to the first edition of the *Principia*, 8th May 1686. *Principia*. Motte Cajori, pp. xvii-xviii

¹⁴ We have in mind problems treated in the *Principia*, *Opticks*, and in the practice of alchemy. For a sample of Newton’s work on alchemy, see Castillejo (1981). *Expanding Force*, pp.17-29

¹⁵ See his General Scholium in *Principia*. Motte-Cajori, p.546

¹⁶ See his *Opticks*, p.370

¹⁷ See the first paragraph in his first Letter to Richard Bentley in *Opera Omnia* IV, p.429

superintendence of a supreme being”.¹⁸ If his scientific enterprise is overshadowed with discussions about God to the extent that theology and his ‘natural philosophy’ are amalgamated together, what more of his scientific problems!

His fervent belief in the connection between God and problems can also be seen in his view about problems and their solutions. God is simple for He is the One. Accordingly problems and the manner of solving them should portray simplicity. Says Newton: “As the world, which to the naked eye exhibits the greatest variety of objects, appears very simple in its internal constitution when surveyed by a philosophic understanding, and so much the simpler by how much the better it is understood, so it is in these visions. It is the perfection of God’s works that they are all done with the greatest simplicity. He is the God of order and not of confusion. And therefore as they that would understand the frame of the world must endeavor to reduce their knowledge to all possible simplicity, so it must be in seeking to understand these visions.”¹⁹

What I want to emphasize from the passage is the similarity of finding the solutions to problems. Solutions to problems should be based on the scientist’s belief in the attributes of God (God of order and not of confusion). The scientist should assume that the problem needs to be tackled in an orderly fashion in order to arrive at the simplest solution.

In view of these passages, I claim that Newton construes scientific problems as problems that have solutions which would enhance the scientist’s knowledge of the Deity. Furthermore, according to Newton, phenomena are not made up from the worlds of brute facts. It is not merely data resulting from sense observations such as the rising and setting of the sun. Rather ‘phenomena’ to Newton results from observing the sensible while analyzing and thinking about nature and God. As a matter of fact, the various planets and the Sun which Newton mentions in order to support his arguments about the Deity²⁰ constitutes the materials for Phenomenon I to IV of his *Principia*.²¹

¹⁸ *Keynes MS. 130* (6), University of Cambridge, King’s College Library. See also Manuel (1968). *A Portrait*, p.417

¹⁹ See *Yahuda*, MS. 1.1. See also *Appendix A* in Manuel (1974). *Religion...*, p.120

²⁰ See for example, Newton’s first Letter to Richard Bentley dated 10th December 1692, in *Isaac Newton Papers and Letters on Natural Philosophy*, edited by I.B. Cohen, pp.286-287

²¹ See his *Principia*. Motte-Cajori, pp.401-406

The above two cases are given in order to illustrate the view that there exist an organic relationship between scientific and religious problems, based on the belief that science is a problem-solving activity. This is not to deny that throughout history, religion and science, or natural philosophy as the case maybe, does not always exercise a symbiotic relationship. However it is adequate, for the purpose of the comparative religious course under review, to argue that religion and science can complement each other in the pursuit of national development.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In order for any country to be industrialized, science must be organically link to all the fundamental fabrics of the society. Science must be one of the main agenda of the state and scientific thinking should be deeply ingrained in the people's mind. In retrospect, the comparative religious courses offered would not help promote Vision 2020 unless religion, as practiced in this pluralistic society, and science, are presented in an organic, harmonious way. This can be done by infusing scientific problems as religious problems, thereafter turning scientific endeavors as those which are religiously sanctioned. The real challenge in a multi religious country like Malaysia, as it were, is to utilize comparative religious courses in promoting science without making religion merely as a vehicle for the progress of science. Paraphrasing Galileo, although the Holy Ghost `does not teach how the heavens go', solving religious problems does provide some insights of `how to go to heaven', scientific or otherwise.

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