

## **Inter-faith Relations in Malaysia: A Reflection on Issues of Justice and Ethics**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to offer some insights on how the issue of justice overrides inter-faith relations in Malaysia. Materials used for logical analysis include relevant verses of the Qur'ān and *Hadīths* and their authoritative interpretations including Ethics; official government records; and, baseline data of recent research. Of concern here is Justice in all its dimensions, such as the national language, democratic politics, fair economics, and acceptance of rich multi-cultural traditions. A brief analysis of the imperative character traits of courtesy and kindness—*kesopanan dan kesusilaan* in *Rukun Negara* or the Malaysian national principles—is carried out in the context of the Malaysian term *muhabbah*, identified as “affectionate friendship.” The origin of such a friendship is the notion of “biological brotherhood” in the worldview of Islam. The article shall also examine social disunity and enmity from the moral and ethical lens, arguing thus that disunity

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is an effect of the moral vice of envy, which is caused by rancour, which in turn, resulted from anger.

**Keywords**

Inter-faith relations, justice, courtesy, kindness, muhibbah, goodwill, brotherhood, unity, disunity.

**Introduction**

For every three Muslims in Malaysia, there are two others who follow different faiths and beliefs. In reality, the Muslim community, which amounts to over 18 million people, co-exists with more than 11 million community of followers of other faiths, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Chinese Beliefs, Sikhism and others. Inter-faith co-existence is, thus, imperative with regard to Malaysia's national unity.

Malaysia's success thus far consists of gaining independence from the imperialist powers of Siam, Portugal, Dutch, British and Japan, in maintaining its sovereignty, and in progressing in science and technology and economy. Since independence, Malaysia has achieved the best economic record in Asia, with GDP growing an average of 6.5 per cent for almost 50 years, with the economy expanding in the new, innovative sectors of science and commerce.

All these reflect that to a certain extent, there is social integration and unity in Malaysia, which consists of, among others, adequately understanding other faiths and beliefs, positive perception, and low level of prejudice towards other adherents. A research in 2013–2014 aimed at surveying for baseline data finds that firstly, the majority of respondents or 95 per cent score high, reflecting a high level of basic knowledge in his religion as well as others'. Secondly, the majority of respondents have positive perception of followers of other faiths: more than 95 per cent in the Peninsular and Sarawak, and 63.8 per cent in Sabah. Thirdly, the majority of respondents or more than 80 per cent have a relatively

low level of prejudice.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, while there is successful social integration, we believe unity can always be gradually enhanced.

Such success is largely because, since the fight for independence, the vision of the country is to safeguard the interest of all including the minority. There is no compulsion in terms of religion, culture, and in learning and speaking other languages. However, given Malaysia's diverse races and tongues in a relatively young country, for the sake of social integrity and healthy communication, the Constitution of the Federation enshrines that there should be one national language, the Malay language.

### **Unity or Disunity Reflects the State of Multi-Dimensional Justice and Fairness**

Another significant national document that envisions the future of Malaysia, the *Rukun Negara* (the Malaysian National Philosophy), emphasises the following three aspects. First, being democratic in politics; Second, fairness and justice in economics; and, third, acceptance of the fact that Malaysia inherits rich and colourful multi-cultural traditions.

On the contrary, disunity looms large on the horizon, if the contrary happens. First, absolutist government: with no check and balance, socio-political authorities will incline to oppress the weak and powerless. This results in disunity between the powerful authorities and the vulnerable and the defenseless.

Indeed, throughout the Qur'ān, God condemns all political power obtained through aggression or criminal violence, inasmuch as it is bound to give rise to oppression, suffering and moral corruption in society. One such verse is "Indeed, Pharaoh tyrannised over the land and divided the

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1. "Laporan Penyelidikan Isu dan Cabaran Hubungan antara Penganut Agama di Malaysia," a collaboration of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM), 2013–2014.

people thereof into different classes; he oppressed one class of them, ...for he was one of those who spread corruption on earth.”<sup>2</sup>

It is such a Pharaonic claim to absolute power that is the overriding destructive force against human civilisation, whereby “he has transgressed all bounds of what is right”<sup>3</sup> or the limits of golden mean confirmed by divine law and sound rationality. Moreover, God commands through the Prophet Muḥammad in a *ḥadīth qudsī*, “O My servants! I have forbidden Myself from oppressing anyone, and have made it (oppression) unlawful for you, too. Thus, you must not oppress each other.”<sup>4</sup>

The second cause of social disunity is corrupt economic system, when the rich stockpiles national wealth at the expense of the poor and the helpless, in a huge economic gap. A just circulation of wealth is indeed emphasised throughout the Qur’ān: “wealth should not circulate solely among the rich.”<sup>5</sup>

While promoting an ethical social order, God severely denounces the condition of economic disequilibrium. Fazlur Rahman, in his work, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*,<sup>6</sup> views that gross economic disparities are most persistently criticised because it is the most difficult issue to remedy at the heart of social discord. It signifies a pernicious divisiveness of humanity and a major cause of the decay of societies.

Even if the wealthy rightfully earn something, they could not spend it just as they wished. Not all wealth earned rightfully belongs to them; the needy, the indigent and the deprived also have a right in it. God rebukes the act of hoarding wealth and heartless uncharitableness. The Qur’ān refers to those who hoard their wealth without spending anything thereof on righteous causes in the following poignant words, “those who

2. *Al-Qaṣaṣ* (28):4.

3. *Ta Ha* (20): 24; *al-Nāẓi’āt* (79):16.

4. Related on the authority of Imām Muslim and Ibn Ḥanbal.

5. *Al-Ḥaṣhr* (59): 7.

6. Second ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1999), 38.

amass gold and silver and spend not in the way of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Those who lead selfish lives also have been severely reprimanded. Even as they perform religious rituals, they fail the test of “little acts of neighbourly help, the thousand little courtesies and kindnesses of daily life, the supply of needs which cost little but mean much.” God censures their hypocrisy in the Qurʾān:

Have you observed him who gives lie to Religion?  
It is he who treats the orphans (the helpless) with  
contempt and feels no urge to feed the needy. Woe,  
then, to those who pray, yet are neglectful of their  
prayers—those who pray for show and deny all  
assistance [to their fellow-men].<sup>8</sup>

The third cause of disunity is intolerance and narrow perception of cultural diversity. A fair and just appreciation of other cultural elements, as outlined in Malaysia’s *National Cultural Policy*,<sup>9</sup> must take into account Malay and Islamic culture without any chauvinistic elements whatsoever. Last but not far from least, the fourth cause of disunity is if the national language is neglected in cultivating “national identity” despite it being the mother tongue of a singularly largest majority of around 60 per cent of the population.

### **Unity or Disunity Reflecting the State of Courtesy**

The *Rukun Negara* also affirms courtesy and kindness (*kesopanan dan kesusilaan*) as the most important character trait including in inter-faith relations. On the other hand, arrogance and causing offence to the feelings of others are thoroughly condemned,

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7. *Al-Tawbah* (9): 34.

8. *Al-Māʾūn* (107): 1–7.

9. See *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan, 1973), which compiles papers deliberated at the National Cultural Congress from 16–20 August 1971.

regardless whether it is committed by the rich, the powerful, or linguistic and cultural chauvinists.

Observing current reports in both the traditional and social media, especially on partisan politics and hawkish pressure groups, one always wonders whether Malaysians now promote being respectful of diversity more than being arrogant, or the other way around. Being respectful, polite or arrogant all are character traits of individuals, which are inculcated by parents, family, teachers and educational institutions. Have we taught our children and students sufficiently about being respectful to humanity without arrogance? Have Muslim families for example, taught their children the fundamental purport of such following tradition, where Mu‘āz ibn Jabal said,<sup>10</sup>

The Messenger of God commanded me saying, “O, Mu‘āz, I command you to fear God, to speak truthfully, to fulfil the promise, to deliver what you are entrusted with, to shun perfidious actions, to care for the neighbour, to have compassion towards the orphan, to be soft-spoken, to be liberal in extending greeting, to do your best no matter what you do, to curtail your fallacious hope, to cleave to the faith, to study the Qur‘ān, to love the hereafter, to be anxious in regard to the Day of Reckoning, and to act with humility...”<sup>11</sup>

10. Reported by al-Ghazzālī, “*Kitāb Adāb al-Ma‘īshah wa Akhlāq al-Nubuwwah*,” *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1992), 2: 388. The ḥadīth with a slight variant is reported by Abū Nu‘āym, *Kitāb Hilyat al-Awliyā’*, as noted by al-Sayyid Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf al-Sādah al-Muttaqīn bi Sharh Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1989), 8: 198–9; see also, 7: 189–90. The ḥadīth is also recorded in al-Kharā‘ī’s *Makārim al-Akhlāq* and al-Bayhaqī’s *Kitāb al-Zuhd*.

11. For the English translation of the ḥadīth, see also Muhammad al-Akili, *The Beauty of the Righteous & Ranks of the Elite* (Philadelphia: Pearl Publishing House, 1995), 248–249; and, L. Zolondek, *Book XX of al-Ghazzālī’s Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963), 23 note 3.

Notwithstanding the partisan politicians and the media, one cautiously believes that many Malaysians regardless of religious affiliation—or rather because they are inspired by their faith—are, indeed, respectful of each other. The Malaysian founding father called this *muhibbah*, meaning mutual love or affectionate friendship among human kind, which is more than mere tolerance.<sup>12</sup>

### **Universal Biological Unity in the Worldview of Islam**

Merciful human relationship is a great idea originated from scriptural Revelation, recorded in the Qurʾān. Its basis is the understanding that humanity originates from the common origin called *nafs wāḥidah*—a fact emphasised throughout the Qurʾān.<sup>13</sup> There is essential unity of the human races as God’s creatures. As human beings, all of us belong to one human family, without any inherent biological superiority of one over another. The Prophet Muḥammad was quoted to have said, “Man is but a God-fearing believer or a hapless sinner. All people are the children of Adam, and Adam was created out of dust.”<sup>14</sup>

In the worldview of Islam, while among Muslims there is “religious brotherhood”, between Muslim and followers of other faiths there is “biological brotherhood” of the human race.<sup>15</sup> According to this teaching, biologically all of us are

12. Haslina Ibrahim, Rohaiza Rokis & Wan Nurhasniah Wan Husin, “Muhibbah is not Religious Pluralism: The Understanding of Religious Coexistence among Religious Leaders in Malaysia,” *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 9 (2016): 67–85.
13. See, for example, the Qurʾān, the following chapters: *al-Nisāʾ* (4):1; *al-Anʿām* (6): 98; *al-ʿAraf* (7):189; and, *al-Zumar* (39): 6.
14. This is a well-authenticated (*hasan*) *hadīth* in itself. See Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, 6 vols. (Cairo: n.p., 1895, repr. Beirut: Dar Sadir, n.d.), 2: 361; *hadīth* no. 8736; quoted by Nūḥ Ḥā Mīm Keller, *Sea without Shore: A Manual of the Sufi Path* (Maryland: Amana Publications, 2011), 206.
15. See for example Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638H/1240), *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah fī Maʿrifat al-Asrār al-Mālikiyyah wa al-Mulkiyyah*, 4 vols. (Cairo: 1911. Repr. Beirut: Dar Sadir, (n.d.)), 3: 381.

brothers and sisters as we are all from one living entity (*nafs wāḥidah*), whose proper name is Adam.<sup>16</sup>

It is one of the wonders of God's creation, that from one person we have grown to be so many; each individual has so many faculties and capacities, and yet we are all one. In other words, this common origin should appeal to the solidarity of humankind, as all of them are brothers and sisters. Even an English philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (d. 1947)<sup>17</sup> admitted that in order for a civilisation to be great, it requires diversity:

The differences between the nations and races of mankind are required to preserve the conditions under which higher development is possible. One main factor in the upward trend of animal life has been the power of wandering. Perhaps this is why the armour-plated monsters fared badly. They could not wander. Animals wander into new conditions. They have to adapt themselves or die. Mankind has wandered from the trees to the plains, from the plains to the seacoast, from climate to climate, from continent to continent, and from habit of life to habit of life. When man ceases to wander, he will cease to ascend in the scale of being. Physical wandering is still important, but greater still is the power of man's spiritual adventures—adventures of thought, adventures of passionate feeling, adventures of aesthetic experience. A diversification among human communities is essential for the provision of the incentive and material for the Odyssey of the human spirit. Other nations of different habits are not enemies: they are godsend. Men require of their neighbours something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently

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16. See also Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Sūrah al-Nisā' (4): 58 and Sūrah al-Mu'min (23): 12–14* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islam Banking and Finance Malaysia, 2015), esp. 31–57.

17. A. N. Whitehead was also a great mathematician, and metaphysician.



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different to provoke attention, and something great enough to command admiration. We must not expect, however, all the virtues. We should even be satisfied if there is something odd enough to be interesting.<sup>18</sup>

Arising from this kinship, there are mutual obligations, mutual rights and duties, of human beings towards one another. In another universal verse, God says, “O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain has spread abroad a multitude of men and women. Be careful of your duty toward God in whom you claim your rights of one another...”<sup>19</sup> All humankind is one, whose mutual rights and dignity must therefore be treated with full respect they deserve. This is the fact, which is always valid even if each of us has our own religious communities.

It is in this context that the Prophet Muḥammad states, “All creatures are equal dependents upon God (*ʿyālullāh*), and those dearest to God are the ones who treat His dependents most kindly” or in another translation, “The whole of mankind is the family of God and he amongst His family is dearest to Him, who does good to others.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the Prophet highlights the fact that all humanity is equal under God’s care, He Who feeds, nourishes and sustains them. Moreover, those dearest to God are the ones who are of benefit to others.

Saadi of Shiraz, one of the greatest classical poets, has this to say on universal brotherhood (translated by Hamid Vahid Dastjerdi):

18. See Whitehead’s work *Science and the Modern World*, XIII, quoted in *Great Treasury of Western Thought: A Compendium of Important Statements on Man and His Institutions by the Great Thinkers in Western History*, ed. Mortimer Adler & Charles Van Doren (New York & London: R.R. Bowker Co., 1977), §15.2.77, 984.

19. *Al-Nisā’* (4):1.

20. Narrated by al-Bayhaqī, as quoted by Abū al-Hasan ‘Alī al-Husni al-Nadwī, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah* (Jeddah: Dār al-Shurūq, 1977), 405. Tr. Mohiuddīn Ahmad, *Muḥammad Rasūlullāh the Apostle of Mercy* (Lucknow: Academy of Public Research and Publications, 2nd. repr., 1982), 451.

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Adam's sons are body limbs, to say;  
For they're created of the same clay.  
Should one organ be troubled by pain,  
Others would suffer severe strain.  
Thou, careless of people's suffering,  
Deserve not the name, "human being."

Homa Katouzian's rendition follows:

Children of Adam belong to one another,  
Who, in creation, are of the same basic matter.  
When one member is hurt by an act of fate,  
Other members cannot remain free of hurt.  
You who are mindless of other's pain,  
Do not deserve to be called human.

Islam thus strongly condemns all racial prejudices. Our "natural" outward differentiations—whether in terms of gender, race, language and skin colour—are deemed by Islam merely as superficial labels. It is a person's inward goodness; his "nurtural" ethical quality—measured according to universal religious values—that should be the basis for our esteem for others.

We should never ridicule nor insult nor unnecessarily be suspicious of one another, just because the other is of different gender, race, language or hue. Racial quarrels must by all means be avoided, through proper understanding of one's own religion.

In the same worldview, while all Muslims are one people (an *ummah* or more specifically *ummatu 'l-ġābah*), all humanity is one people, too (an *ummah*, or more specifically *ummatud-da'wah*), as people of other faiths are always addressed and preached to by the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>21</sup> There is no compulsion, and God opens the opportunity to learn, deliberate, accept or reject Islam's religious truth, throughout one's life.

21. See, for example, Al-Tahānawī (d. 1158H), *Kashshāf Istilāhāt al-Funūn*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1998), 1: 123, which quoted *kitāb Sharḥ al-Mishkāṭ*.

In human relationship, it is a basic duty and obligation to have compassion, pity, friendship, love, and affection, including first, mutual forgiveness of human weaknesses; second, openheartedness, kindness, and benevolence; and, third, loves the goodness, benefits and prosperity gained by others.

The Prophet Muḥammad promotes mutual love or affectionate friendship among the human kind when he said, “Love for humanity what you love for yourself.”<sup>22</sup> In other traditions, the Prophet said, “He who shows no mercy to mankind, God does not show mercy to him,”<sup>23</sup> and, “Hearts naturally love those who are kind to them and despise those who are cruel.”<sup>24</sup>

Islam promotes interaction and not isolationism from other religious traditions merely due to different religion and culture. Indeed, there are many legacies of Islam with other civilisations in terms of knowledge and sciences; technologies and techniques; academic methods and methodologies. All those are successfully established throughout history through interactions and cooperation towards universal benefits for global community, regardless of background.<sup>25</sup>

In its history, Islam has no fear to new ideas from other cultures and civilisations, whether Persian, Roman, Indian, Chinese, Western or others. As long as it can be benefitted from within the framework of the worldview of Islam, ideas

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22. Narrated by Bukhārī, *al-Ta'rikh*, quoted in a *hadīth* collection by Shaykh Al-Amin Ali Mazrui, tr. Hamza Yusuf, *The Content of Character Copybook: Ethical Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad*, hereinafter *Ethical Sayings* (San Ramon: Kinza Press, 2007), 22–23. See also *Sahīh Bukhārī*, 13 (Kitāb 2, Hadīth 6). Also website of University of Southern California-Muslim Students Association or USC-MSA: Vol. 1, Book 2, Hadith 13.

23. *Sahīh Muslim*, 2319a (Book 43, Hadīth 88). USC-MSA: Book 30, Hadīth 5737.

24. Narrated by Bayhaqī, quoted in *Ethical Sayings*, 118–119.

25. See, for example, Salim T. S. al-Hassani et al., *1001 Inventions: Muslim Heritage in Our World*, second ed. (Manchester: Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation, 2007).

must be cultivated. Knowledge and sciences should not be suppressed, but rather rejuvenated and passed on to the next generation.

### Disunity Viewed through the Lens of Ethics

Islam recognises profound wisdom in the fact that God has created various genders, nations and races, so that they may know one another and participate to attain noble thoughts and good conduct. In a Qur’ānic verse addressed to all, God says, “O mankind! We have created you all from a single pair of a male and female [Ādam and Hawā’], and made you into nations and races, that you may know each other. Verily, the noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct.”<sup>26</sup>

In order to understand how social disunity and enmity arises, we may benefit from the moral teachings of the great al-Ghazzālī who taught that:<sup>27</sup>

- i. envy is caused by rancour;
- ii. rancour is, in its turn, caused by anger.  
Viz., anger → rancour → envy

In the author’s observation, on the one hand, some Muslims in Malaysia are unhappy with the implications of the granting of citizenships to people of other faiths and races, who largely dominate the economy since pre-Independence due to colonial arrangement. On the contrary, it is submitted that, the 1957 citizenship issue is already part of God’s decree, while economic dominance is His gift among others due to the diligence of those people to sustain their wealth.

On the other hand, some people of other faiths are angry with Constitutional implications of the following, in

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26. See *al-Hujūrāt* (49):13.

27. See, for example, Muhammad Abū Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazali: A Composite Ethics in Islam*, hereinafter *The Ethics of al-Ghazali* (New York: Caravan Books, 1978), 118–123.

recognition of Malay-Muslims' historical contributions to the land:

1. Islam is the religion of the Federation of Malaysia [Art. 3(1)];
2. Other religious doctrines or beliefs are controlled or restricted from being propagated among persons professing the religion of Islam [Art. 11(4)];
3. The national language shall be the Malay language [Art. 152], which is the mother tongue of the majority among Muslims in Malaysia;
4. Privileges, position, honours and dignities of the Rulers (Part IV, Chapter 2), who are Muslim Malays;
5. The special position of the Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak, including quotas in respect of the public services, scholarships, educational or training privileges (Art. 153);
6. Constitutional interpretation of Malay to mean a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to the Malay customs [Art.160 (2)].

The anger may be minimised if it can be ensured that those Constitutional provisions do not encroach the economics, cost of living, cultures and lives of people. God recorded Prophet Shū'aib's statement in the Qur'ān : "... and do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs, and do not act wickedly on earth by spreading corruption."<sup>28</sup>

28. See the Qur'ān, chapters *Hūd* (11):85 and *al-Shu'arā'* (26):183. "What is rightfully theirs" refers to physical possessions as well as moral and social rights. See also, *al-A'raf* (7):85–86.

Some people are not angry with the above-mentioned Constitutional arrangement *per se*, but because such provisions are sometimes abused through corruption of political and administrative powers, it thus harmed the people. Sometimes, this is just a perception but imagine the extent of the anger if it was real.

If the cause of anger is not remedied, it becomes constricted and may worsen as rancour, which is more dangerous as the enmity of an angry man (or group) cleaves persistently to his soul (or social consciousness).<sup>29</sup> Some socio-ethical evils produced by rancour are: envy and joy at a misfortune befallen by another; ceases to favour another; ceases to stand beside one in need; desists to associate with another; and, refrains from encouraging one to good.

Ultimately, rancour produces more destructive trait and the root of all other evil disposition—envy—wherein man is pained when another obtains any good.<sup>30</sup> The envier wants that good taken away from him even though he himself will not obtain any advantage from its removal.

Such an envying wish opposes the fact that every good that a man possesses is God's gift, which comes from His treasury, and as it were, His decree. The envier takes pleasure rather in another's misfortune. Besides being bad in itself, envy is also bad because it produces innumerable sins such as slander, murder, civil war, and so on. It is one's hope and prayer that Malaysia will never be taking that destructive path.

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29. Cf. *The Ethics of al-Ghazali*, 120.

30. *Ibid.*, 122.