Perception of Pluralism and Modern Islamic Society

Mya Su San and Nor Atiah Ismail

Department of Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture, University Putra Malaysia (UPM), 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

ARTICLE INFO
Article history:
Received 10 November 2015
Accepted 22 December 2015
Available online 30 December 2015

KEYWORDS:
Pluralism, Diversity, Multi-racial, Islamic City

ABSTRACT
Islam is well understood from the Holy Quran as the most perfect and peaceful religion in the world. It is however, now the most misunderstood perception especially among the non-Muslims; and one of the primary concerns of many tribulations occurring in this era. History states otherwise, indeed. Muslims have always been the best neighbors as citizens and the best guardians as rulers. In the process of reviving true Islamic essence, pluralism plays a big role. This study investigates the reasons of misconceptions towards Islam and what went wrong in understanding the purest and finest teachings ever existed. In additions, this paper discusses how pluralism is an essential factor in shaping our holistic societies.

INTRODUCTION
Islam can proudly claim that it promotes pluralism and condemn racism rather than any other religion in the world; when Prophet (pbuh) clearly said in his last sermon ‘……All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action……..’. Islam, is a set of guidance to shape the way of living a better life. A religious tradition is something that is interpreted for the actual revelation. It is a response to the revelation itself. (Nor Atiah Ismail, 2015). With around 1.6 billion Muslim individuals worldwide, it is impossible to match our traditions and understanding the Islamic concept even though we all refer to the same texts. Our responses to the guidance of Islamic values varies and within Islamic communities itself. The famous hadith on divisions recorded by Hazrat Abu Huraira and more than 15 companions of the Prophet (pbuh) which is mentioned in famous hadith collection books such as Abu Dawood, at-Tirmidhi or al-Hakim states ‘…..my Ummah will split up into seventy-three sects.’ It is clearly understood by most scholars that religious approaches will be differ immensely within our Muslim community itself, which Prophet (pbuh) himself welcomed and cherish the pluralism by calling everyone ‘My Ummah’ [7]. Many of the times, we find ourselves less concerned with the nature and contents of Islamic law, and more interested in arguments about its implementations [8]. If we do not understand the context and background thoroughly, many of the time we will find ourselves noticing the contradictions through the whole Quran. Because, it is the same Quran Prophet (pbuh) has shown love and mercy to mankind; and the same Quran many extreme Islamist and terrorist groups refer to when they commit mass genocides and turbulences in the society.

We could find a verse like “O’ you who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies. They are allies of each other, and he amongst you who becomes their ally is one of them. Verily, God does not guide the unjust.” as well as “Those who believe, those who follow Jewish scriptures, the Christians, the Sabians, and any who believe in God and the Final Day, and do good all shall have their reward with their Lord and they will not come to fear and grieve” [3]. Islamic scholars who spent their lives trying to understand Quran always tend to conclude Quran does not have contradictions. But one has to recognize that many factors including time and place, or whom it was addressed to plays an important role in understanding the Quran. For example, revelations contained in the Mecca verses compared to those of the Medina are totally different. While the Mecca verses concentrate on the spiritualist and Universalist aspects of the religion, the Medina verses are
about state, community, inter-communal relations and other more mundane concerns that had arisen by then [3]. Therefore, before making a conclusion to ourselves by merely reading a translated version of Quran and compare the random verses can often leads us to misunderstandings. We should ponder more in understanding Quran itself in discussing facts about Islamic concepts.

2.0 Literature Review & Discussion:

Rather than comparing the verses out of Quran randomly without trying to understand the context and background of each cases and overly distracting ourselves to decide whether it is right or wrong, we need to focus more on how Prophet (pbuh) dealt with pluralism or how the other great Muslim civilizations death with it. Islam tolerated and promoted pluralism rather than any other religions in the world [9]. A simple fact that Prophet (pbuh) had a Jewish wife; or Jewish and Christian communities relied so much on him and Muslim community during and after his prophethood clearly shows the tolerance level of Islam at its peak.

During the early days of Islam in migration to Abyssinia fleeing from the persecution of the ruling Quraysh tribe of Mecca. Muslims were saved by a Christian King who had a good bond with the Prophet (pbuh). During the time of Saladin or Ottoman Empire, Muslims protected Christians and Jews. Neither colour nor background was a matter of conflict for true Muslims. And yet the bitter truth with out of 4 great Caliphs of Islam, 3 were murdered; and assumable by the Muslim hypocrites. Whether or not Islam promotes pluralism and peace in the texts, it is no doubt that many of the conflicts we face are somehow related to Muslims.

No subject in the current global debate has been more open to misunderstanding and misrepresentation than Islam and the Shariah (Islamic guidance and principles) [10]. The reasons for this are many and varied. Primary among them is Islam's long confrontation with Christianity [4]. The result, is that many Western scholars and lay people are confused and bewildered when such topics are discussed. The confusion is unfortunate because approximately one person in five in the world today - some 900 million people in more than 75 countries - is a Muslim [5]. According to the Pew Research Centre in 2011 there were 49 Muslim-majority countries. Around 62% of the world's Muslims live in South and Southeast Asia, with over 1 billion adherents. The largest Muslim population in a country is in Indonesia, a nation home to 12.7% of the world's Muslims, followed by Pakistan (11. 0%), India (10. 9%), and Bangladesh (9.2%). Only about 20% of Muslims live in Arab countries. In the Middle East, the non-Arab countries of Turkey and Iran are the largest Muslim-majority countries; in Africa, Egypt and Nigeria have the most populous Muslim communities. The study found more Muslims in the United Kingdom than in Lebanon and more in China than in Syria [6]. Much more than middle-east, combined Muslim population of South, South East Asia; and Africa together will be defining Islamic identity soon. With different backgrounds and policies currently practiced in these countries and with Islamophobic reactions throughout the world, Islamic perceptive on pluralism need to be more highlighted. Many of these countries are not fully Islamic countries and they have a great number of non-Muslim population in the country. Their direction towards a better nation is ‘Democracy’ rather than 'Islam' or 'Shariah'. So how do we deal with this situation and how Islam can be a part of it?

A democratic state can be established upon any moral framework as long as pluralism remains the source of its legitimacy. Democracy, today’s most popular political and socio-economic ideology’s main reason to be favoured most is pluralism rather than secularism. England continues to maintain a national church whose religious head is also the country’s sovereign and whose bishops serve in the upper house of Parliament. India was, until recently, governed by members of a theology of Hindu Awakening (Hindutva) bent on applying an implausible but enormously successful vision of “true Hinduism” to the state. And yet, like the United States, these countries are considered democracies, not because they are secular but because they are, at least in theory, dedicated to pluralism [2]. So it is not an impossible thing for Islam and Democracy to go along together. After all, we should also note that the separation of “church and state” of which America is so proud was established in Islam fourteen centuries ago, when it was decided that no Caliph would have religious authority over the community [2].

Despite the diverse nature of most world societies, very little attention has been paid in consideration of the pluralistic aspects on city planning [12/13]. With the different needs and outputs they can offer to their society, it is impossible not to recognize our social-cultural subgroups in planning policies for a city. If we overlook the past successful civilizations, coexistence is in many layers of exchange and cultural influences of one civilization over another. Only when we end up putting ourselves into groups of ‘Us’ against ‘Them’, it eventually lead to the concept of disliking ‘The Others’ and destroy our peaceful equilibrium of the society.

Many of the time, we overlook religion and ethnicity as outdated notions that would tend to disappear with modernity and its process of secularism. Many theorists claimed that with industrialization and urbanization, the people who moved into new spaces and jobs would eventually transform their identities and become modern, secular, and urban new men [3]. An important aspect of this argument is that modernization and secularization are indivisible, so that as countries became modernized, it is very likely that they would have to also become secularized. If we study carefully about the European history of modernization, we would see how religion and ethnicity was wiped out and put into background to emerge the modern and secularized countries. They then
produce other tragic replicas by force through revolutions and wars such as Ataturk in Turkey or Nasser in Egypt. Nationalist leaders practice the strict secular regimes, burying the Islamic traditions and practices under several layers of forced secularism [3]. Nevertheless, as we still experience the heightened religious sides within the twentieth and the twenty-first century modern and secularized policies, we are more aware than ever that the religion does not disappear. Religion and culture will change and adapt, presenting themselves in the modern society [3]. Many more discriminations and genocides occurred within the last century by trying to wipe out the religion from the picture to secularize the countries. And yet today, this topic seems to voice out louder day by day and seek more attention to become part of our ideas and practices of the modern world. And the question of religious reform and coexistence with other socio-cultural groups in a modern society has been raised especially in the context of Islam with the immense hostility and Islamophobia towards it globally.

Islam functioned for nearly four centuries as part of a framework of the state religion and as the setting for boundaries between different religious, a tolerant and responsive framework of relations between the state and religious groups. In the paper 'Islam and Toleration: Studying the Ottoman Imperial Model' [3], Barkey, K. examines examined the role of Islam in Ottoman society by enquiring series of questions such as: How was tolerance built in the Ottoman system: How did it originate? How much was based on the peculiar relationship between Islam and the Ottoman state? How much was based on Islamic precepts of relations between Islam and the “peoples of the book”? How much on the active construction and mediation of the state and different groups? The author concluded that Islam played a significant role in both religion and politics aspects. The empire was known that its rule over diversity, difference and the pressure of many dualities was liable to fragmentation. The solution was flexibility across differences and pluralism, embracing alternatives and allowing them to flourish under the control of the state [11]. From secular law to religious law, from orthodoxy to varieties of syncretism and heterodoxy, from the diverse administration of ethnic and religious difference, a space for alternatives and for movement existed. The concrete outcome of religious forbearance was actively constructed in the organizational and relational. Contrary to that in present day societies (such as Nigeria), where there is a sharp territorial division between Muslims and non-Muslims, the legal division provides an additional source of social conflict [8]. Thus the Prophet (pbuh) said: “Humankind will remain in a good state as long as they do not resent each other.” (Reported by al-Tabariani and judged sahih al-Albani.)[1]

**Methodology:**
A qualitative method will be implemented in this study with the findings of multisite (cross case-study) on several major Islamic countries. The study will results to a recommendation of the most appropriate planning methods to improve modern pluralist society of Kuala Lumpur with several secondary outputs such as: categorizing the different pluralist societies within Islamic World, pinpointing the Islamic guidelines dealing with pluralist societies and identifying the pluralistic society and practicing conventional planning methods of Malaysia.

**Conclusion:**
‘And We have not revealed to you the Book, [O Muhammad], except for you to make clear to them that wherein they have differed and as guidance and mercy for a people who believe.’ (Al-Quran; 16:64)

For the true believers and Muslims (surrenders who submit only to the one true creator), it is a necessity to answer the undeniable call to pursue justice and cherish pluralism. This study provides a brief insight on understanding the importance of pluralism in modern Islamic world. Indeed; pluralism, in the Islamic perception of Shariah, needs to be analysed further to enhance the Islamic city planning principles.

And as Rumi said, ‘Out beyond ideas of wrong-doings and right-doings, there is a field .......... I'll meet you there.’

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**
I would like to express my very great appreciation to Dr. Nor Atiah Ismail for her knowledge contribution, constant assistance, support and care. And I am always particularly grateful for valuable guidance and support of Dr. Mohd Yazid, Dr. Nangkula Utaberta and Dr. Sumarni Ismail. My special thanks are extended for all members of ICSEBS.

**REFERENCES**


