Convergence of Interest and Sharing a Future: Deepening the Understanding of Islam in Asia and Europe

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Since the advent of the 21st century, we notice that there is a global convergence, indeed consensus, in the need to deepen our understanding of Islam and Muslims, not only globally but also in Asia, because outside the Arab-speaking world of the Middle East, the next largest population of Muslims is to be found in Asia – Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia. The urgency became obvious in the aftermath of the September 11th event. Conventionally, Asia has been seen, economically, as the fastest growing region in the world, with Japan, China, India, Taiwan and some countries in Southeast Asia as spearheading this development. The competitiveness of these countries have been seen by those in the developed countries as a threat of sorts. Apparently, the 'economic talk' on Asia is not enough to grasp what is going on in the region. Suddenly, 'Islam in Asia,' as a theme, has to be addressed too, not only in the realm of international and regional politics but also its impact on everyday social life in the Occident, especially, the USA, Europe and Australasia.

Therefore, it is imperative to deepen our knowledge and understanding of Islam in Asia and that could be done best in a comparative manner because globalization has enabled, amongst others, not only the transnational spread of consumerist lifestyle but also the formation of a transnational platform for a globalised Islam. This brief essay is a reflection on some aspects of Islam in Asia, based on a case study of Southeast Asia which has the largest population of Muslim outside the Arab world united linguistically by the Malay language, and some lessons that the rest of the world, especially Europe, could gain by using it as a mirror.

We fully realize that the hope for Asia, in general, and Southeast Asia, in particular, to serve as a moderating example for more radical Muslims around the globe is probably unrealistic. Nonetheless, we also know that there is a concerted effort in Muslim majority countries in the region, especially, in Indonesia and Malaysia to stem the popularity of more radical groups and, at the same time, consolidate de-

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mocratic practices as an instrument to maintain long-term political order and stability in the region.

The brief presentation begins with a discussion and reflection on the experience of Islam Southeast Asia and then the European one with the hope it would benefit both sides and others, too.

The Islam Southeast Asian Experience

The embedding of Islam into the social life of the Malay-speaking inhabitants of the Malay world involved a number of other versions of 'embedded Islam', namely, the Arabic, Indian and Chinese. The articulation of the impact affected the ruling class and the *rakyat* (the ruled or the ordinary folks) rather differently, with the former strong on written/textual tradition and the latter survived on the oral tradition. It thus pluralized the understanding and the practice Islam in the Malay world. The pluralized Islam was embedded and set into a non-Islamic mould that constitutes an admixture of indigenous belief, Hinduism and Buddhism. The layering and the bundling process between the previous non-Islamic beliefs and faiths and the Islamic one has somewhat de-radicalised the general practice of Islam in the Malay world, giving it characteristics quite different to those found in the Middle East, North Africa and East Africa, South Asia and China.

The onset of European colonialism, with its strong non-rationalist or anti-rationalist view regarding Islam or any religion for that matter and its powerful bureaucratic presence, redefined the position of Islam within the Malay world communities. The embedded Islam and other religions became not only peripheralized but also fragmented under the dominance of pro-state and anti-church colonial stance. This fragmentation becomes consolidated with the establishment of modern nation-states, thus breaking-up the 'psychic unity' of the Malay world Malay-speaking Muslim into components and citizens of different nation-states. In some nation-states, they are dominant, like in Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia, but in others they become minority, such as in Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and Cambodia.

In a redefined political, economic and cultural scenario, Islam progressive as ever, became the source for creative dissent for the locals against the colonizers in each of the nascent modern-nation states, hence the emergence of Islam-oriented nationalist movement throughout the Malay world, a minority of which has resorted to violent methods to further their cause. The majority remains democratic in their approach, for they have been conditioned so by the secular-oriented colonial government and later the post-colonial ones.

The arrival of a new version of political Islam, one that is often referred to as 'global Islam', did not diminish the support or dilute the practice of the 'old' political Islam of the *KERAJAAN* as well as the *kerajaan* type. It remains at the core of politics and governance in the Malay world, as shown in the Malaysian case. This makes the Malay world Islam quite different from those in other parts of the world, in the sense

that, resorting to 'revolutionary approach', such as we have witnessed in Iran, is never really an option. Furthermore, the Islam in the Malay world is informed by a more conservative Sunni school while in Iran its Islamic axis is the Shia school doctrines. Therefore, the 'moderateness' of Islam, or political Islam, in the Malay world, has been the result of its embedded diversity that accommodates and, at the same time, restricts any generalized extremist tendencies.

However, this does not mean that the search for the Islamic state, pristine or modern, in the context of contemporary Southeast Asian Islam is irrelevant or over. To some sections of the Muslim communities in the region, especially, amongst the conservatives 'old' *ulamaks* and the 'new' educated, middle-class and self-proclaimed *ulamaks*, the contestation between the traditional-religious and the modern-secular remains the *raison d'etre* for the pursuit of an Islamic state, indeed in some cases fundamentalism. They often hold the view that secularism, nationalism and democracy, as products of modernity, have eroded or are anti-theses to Islam.

Of course, the ideal of *tauhid* would seem to preclude the ideal of secularism, but in the past Muslims in Southeast Asia had accepted a separation of religion and politics. It is not true that Islam makes it impossible for Muslims to create a modern secular state, as Westerners sometimes imagine. Malaysia, as some of the leaders from the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries) have argued, provides us a good case study of a successful modern secular state. But the secularization that has been experienced in Malaysia and in other parts of the Muslim world has been very different compared to that of the West. In the West, it has usually been experienced as benign. In its early days, John Locke, for example, viewed secularism as a new and better way of being religious, since it freed religion from coercive state control and enabled it to be more true to its spiritual ideals. However, in Southeast Asia and in other parts of the Muslim world, secularism has often consisted of a brutal attack upon the religion and the religious. The Marcos, Sukarno and Soeharto regimes have been viewed as such by some sections of the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Kamal Atartuk in Turkey, Shah Pahlavi in Iran and Nasser in Egypt were considered guilty of brutal suppression of the religious in their respective countries.

Nationalism, another Western modern invention, from which Europeans themselves had begun to retreat in the latter part of the 20th century, has been problematic. The unity of the *ummah* has been a treasured ideal. Now the Muslim world has been split into kingdoms and republics, whose borders were arbitrarily drawn by Western powers. The Malay-Islamic world has been a classic case. For instance, the southern part of the Philippines was largely Muslim and the northern was Christian. For a people who was accustomed to defining its identity in religious terms, it would be hard to establish a common 'Filifino' nationalism, hence the unresolved Moro issue and the emergence of Al-Qaeda 'franchised' militant groups in the southern region of the Philippines. In Malaysia, to a certain extent, nationalism was adopted by the elite of the Malay Muslims, but not by the more conservative masses in the northeastern

states of Kelantan and Terengganu, now under the rule of Parti Islam which has been bent on establishing a *Darul-Islam* (Islamic state).

Democracy also posed problems. The Islamic reformers of Indonesia, for instance, pointed out that democracy in itself is not inimical to Islam. The principles of *syurah* (consultation) and *ijmah* (consensus) are endorsed by *syariah*. Indeed, the *khalifah rasyidun* had been elected by a majority vote. Part of the difficult lay in the way the West formulated democracy 'as the government of the people, by the people, and for the people'. In Islam, it is Allah, and not the people, who give legitimacy to a government. The elevation of humans as the ruler often viewed as a usurpation of Allah's sovereignty. This is at the heart of the new *Negara Islam* (Islamic state) document issued by Parti Islam in Malaysia in mid-November 2003, and in the debate about the nature of Islamic state between the ruling party UMNO (United Malays National Organization) and Parti Islam, soon after the September 11th events. But it is not impossible for Muslim countries, and Malaysia is a case in point, to introduce representative forms of government without complying totally with the Western slogan, as Islam in the official religion enshrined in the Constitution.

But in some other Islamic countries, the democratic ideal had often been tainted in practice. For instance, when the British were trying to make Iran a protectorate in the 1920s, the Americans noted that the British often rigged the elections to secure a favorable result for themselves. Between 1923 and 1952, Egypt under British rule had 17 elections, all won by the Wafd party, but only permitted to rule for five times, often forced to stand down by the British. Nasser led a revolution meant to put a stop to this rather unfair and undemocratic British interventions and installed a dictatorial rule. It seems the West proudly proclaimed democracy for its own people, but Muslims were expected to submit to cruel dictatorships, such as in the case of the American-supported Soeharto regime in Indonesia.

Therefore, Muslims have found it difficult to set up a truly modern democratic state, including in Southeast Asia, whether in the Islamic Indonesia or Brunei, perhaps with the exception of Malaysia in which its Malay-Muslim led government had managed to handle its complex multi-ethnic situation rather well. Other solutions seemed little better. The Saudi autocratic or the Pakistani military solution haven't worked well either. In short, the 'democratic imaginations' opened to the Muslim world seems limited and unattractive. Nevertheless, these 'democratic imaginations' have remained 'attractive' possible approaches to sections of the Muslim communities who have chosen the 'fundamentalist' route towards forming an Islamic state in a modern context because Islamic fundamentalism, historically, whether in Southeast Asia or in other parts of the Muslim world, have existed in a symbiotic relationship with coercive secularism, democratic or otherwise.

In other words, the Islamic fundamentalist community, or similar ones from other religions, can thus be seen as the shadow-side of modernity. It can also highlight some of the darker sides of modernity, such as those that we have observed in the

USA, Japan, India and Algeria. In the Southeast Asian context, especially, in the Malay-Islamic world, fundamentalism reveals more likely a fissure that already exists in the society at large, which is polarized between those who enjoy secular culture, and those who regard it with dread. Caught in-between are the members of the new Muslim middle-classes, who found the fundamentalist option highly attractive in their consumerist existence. For instance, in Malaysia and Indonesia, time and again, the educated middle-classes (engineers, academics, doctors and scientists) have been actively involved in fundamentalist activities, from the most militant, such as Jemaah Islamiyah, to the benign ones, such as ICMI (an Indonesian intellectual movement), ABIM (a Malaysian Islamic youth movement) and others.

It seems that the fundamentalist groups in Southeast Asia are motivated by two major orientations: first, a general resistance towards something within or without Islam or the Muslim community, and, second, a negative-activist-aggressive orientation towards anything 'non-Islamic', including within the Islamic-Muslim community. According to the rough estimates provided by recent studies on terrorism in Southeast Asia, perhaps more than 95 per cent of the Muslim fundamentalists in Southeast Asia belong to the former and 5 per cent to the latter. But, it is the latter that has always attracted our attention due to the violent and militant nature of their activities that often costs so many innocent lives. But the moot question remains, shall we ignore the other 95 per cent? Should we then spend 95 per cent of our time, money and energy on the 5 per cent? Something must be done about this stark imbalance which is the result of fear not rationality.

The European Experience with Islam

The experience of Muslims in Southeast Asia offers some useful pointers for reflections for the Europeans. The contest between traditional-religious ideas and perceptions versus the modern-secular ones remain important at the heart of the problematic minority Muslim and majority non-Muslim relationship. The specter of Islamic fundamentalism, especially after the September 11 event, sends a shiver through European/Western society, which seems not nearly so threatened by equally prevalent and violent fundamentalism of other faiths. This has certainly affected the attitude of the Europeans towards the Muslims not only those living in their own countries but also beyond.

But the fear and worry of the non-Muslim European population seems to be, as mentioned by the Foreign Minister of Italy in a CNN interview (7 December 2003), perhaps towards only one per cent of the European Muslims, who are classified as 'terrorists', but not towards the rest, the 99 per cent, who are peace-loving Muslims. He added, "how could we address this clear imbalance of attention and how could we get to know the other 99 per cent better and prevent some of them joining the one per cent? We need to address this urgently!" This statement sums up the contemporary dilemma of Europe and Europeans in its encounter with Islam and Mus-

lims. However, the Muslims-West encounter is a long and rich history of conquest, cooperation, fears, and misconceptions. From the earliest days of Islam as a religious and cultural force, especially in the Middle East, Muslims have experienced some of its most bitter historical encounters with the West.

But in the 20th century we have observed a different kind of Islamic movement towards the West, one in which Muslims have come in increasing numbers seeking employment, refuge, acceptance, and in some cases religious freedom. Today, Muslims are the second largest religious group in much of Europe and North America. But they are not a homogenize group and could be such a diverse lot that being a Muslim is the only connection that they have as a group, at least from the perspective of the non-Muslim. They seem to be facing the same universal set of problems that new migrants worldwide would confront, namely, that of permanent employment, identity, being the target of stereotypes, acceptance and uncertain future.

This experience is not dissimilar to the one encountered by Chinese and Indian migrant workers of Southeast Asia when they first arrived on the shores of the Malay Islamic world, brought by European colonial powers (British, Dutch and French) to serve as cheap laborers in the agricultural plantations (rubber, coffee, oil-palm) and mining (gold, bauxite, tin) industries. The first generation of these migrant laborers was single male who were basically sojourners that came to eke out a living and return to their country of origin upon completion of their work contract. Later, some of them went home temporarily and returned to serve a new contract but this time they brought their wives along. They were joined by new voluntary migrants who also came along with their spouses. The new migrant families soon became expanded to full-fledged nuclear families with the birth of their children who, in turn, became the second-generation of new migrants and many of them eventually stayed on permanently after the European colonial powers left, thus the migrant population transformed their status from that of sojourners to citizens during the post-colonial era.

The great difference between the non-Muslim Southeast Asian migrants and the Muslim European new migrants is in their religious belief but not in their worldly materialistic intentions. In the Southeast Asian case the migrants became the target of ethnic-based concern or suspicion of the colonial regime as well as the indigenous population (even until today), in case of the Muslim European migrants, especially of late, however, they have encountered a problem quite unique. The problem is that they have become the target of generalized suspicion and fear of European non-Muslims, a phenomenon termed by some scholars as 'Islamophobia,' especially as a result of the September 11th event. However, sociologically, the problem poses two inter-related issues, namely, of ethnicity and religion, which in some ways not dissimilar to the ones confronting Muslims in Southeast Asia, albeit less intense and openly confrontational.

The majority of Muslims in Europe are non-European in origin, namely, from Africa (North, East and West Africa) and Asia (mostly from South Asia). They are classified, officially and in popular parlance, as ethnic Arabs, Africans and Asians. They are viewed prejudicially based on stereotypes that have been conditioned to large extent by the historical legacy initiated in the Middle Ages by the Crusades, as well as by current perceptions of an 'essentialised' violent that characterized Islam as a 'changeless religion.' Constant barrage of media reports about Muslim extremist activity in other parts of the world only hardened the negative, homogenised perception of non-Muslim Europeans about the European Muslims. It is not surprising that sometimes they, particularly but not exclusively Arabs, become the object of discrimination, essentially ethnic in nature.

The religious face of the European Muslims has been enhanced and accentuated by the demands made by some groups within the Muslim community for religious freedom, public practice of Islam, and the establishment of a separate Islamic schooling system. The issue of leadership of European Islam is of extreme importance as Muslims themselves, young and old, try to understand questions of faith, practice and identity in a new culture and social milieu. Imams and *ulamaks* trained in conservative traditional Islam knew very little of the culture and society they live in and have not been able to provide guidance as to how to deal with the new condition in the context of an Islamic worldview. They are not able to communicate in the local languages and yet have been expected to play the role of pastors and priests which are quite alien to them.

The combination of these ethnic and religion factors seemed to have created an atmosphere of 'distant and distrust' between the European Muslims, a minority, and non-Muslims, the majority. The negative image of Islam in the global media did not help the problematic situation faced by the European Muslims. This is despite of the conscious effort made by countries like France, Britain, Germany and those from the Nordic region to promote and practice 'multiculturalism' as a public policy. It seemed to have a reversed effect, increased ethnicity and negative perception of Islam as a religion.

The reverse seems to be the case in the Malay-Muslim world, where the non-Muslim is the minority, and became the object of negative perceptions, stereotypes and discrimination, as the Chinese in the region has experienced for sometime. The famous on-going contestation between the *bumiputera/pribumi* (son of the soil) and the non-*bumiputera* in the sphere of economy, culture and society is not difficult to observe because they have often been expressed quite openly by both sides.

In Lie of a Conclusion

The social templates into which Islam in Southeast Asia and Europe have been embedded are obviously different. Perhaps the 'mirror' analogy is an inaccurate one if we are to compare the experience of both regions because they are more differences

than similarities. Unless we adopt a minimalist perspective, in which we accept that Europe and Southeast Asia have been subjected to variations of the same modernization project originating from Europe, then the mirror analogy becomes relevant.

However, on a broader sociological canvass, migration, ethnicity and religion are at the core that underpin the Muslim and non-Muslim relations, both in Southeast Asia and Europe. In Southeast Asia, the non-Muslims are the immigrant but in Europe it is the Muslim. As immigrants and being a minority, they face similar problems of being distrusted and an object of mistrust and stereotype. Ethnicity enhances the prejudices. Religion, especially in Europe, becomes a critical 'ethnic identifier', indeed a negative one, for the Muslim minority's identity. But in Southeast Asia religion is the factor that enhances the dominant position of the Muslims who are identified as an ethnic by virtue of being Malay-speakers.

Tariq Ramadan poses an interesting question vis-à-vis the position of future European Muslims and provides some interesting answers. He asks "how would the Muslim protect its own faith and remain Muslims but at the same time European?". Perhaps the answer lies in the successful embedization process of Islam and Muslim in the larger European community and culture.

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