

ETHICAL INPUTS: THE ROLE OF RELIGIONS

By Ahmad Syafii Maarif

Abstraks

Era modern membawa dampak dilematis terhadap kehidupan manusia. Di satu sisi kemajuan iptek mempermudah kehidupan manusia, di sisi lain merusak kehidupan itu sendiri. Dampak negatif era ini berwujud antagonisme antara ateisme yang berujung pada kosumerisme-nihilism dan fundamentalisme yang menyumbang pada konflik internal dan antaragama yang tak berkesudahan dan semakin memperparah ateisme dan bahkan anti agama. Tulisan ini ingin menjawab dilematis kehidupan manusia era ini dengan menganggapnya sebagai tantangan bagi peran keberagaman umat manusia. Dengan mendasarkan diri pada keyakinan perennialisme agama, dan kemauan untuk bercermin terhadap pengalaman sejarah agama-agama dalam menghadapi modernism, sekularisme, nihilism, dan fundamentalisme, serta kecerdasan dalam menggali nilai-nilai etika dan moral tertinggi agama, khususnya Islam, tulisan ini mencoba memberikan alternatif pemecahannya dengan perumusan etika dan moral bersama umat manusia sebagai etika global yang baru melalui dialog antariman dan kerjasama antaragama sehingga agama bagi kehidupan riil masyarakat menjadi lebih bermakna dan nyata.

مستخلص

تضع الحداثة الراهنة الحياة الإنسانية في مأزق بين نقيضين. فالتطور التكنولوجي والعلمي يحمل آمالاً لتسهيلها، وفي نفس الوقت يحمل مخاطر إفسادها. إن الآثار السلبية للحداثة الراهنة يتمثل في العداء المتحكم بين اللادينية التي تنتهي بسيادة النزعة الاستهلاكية والعدمية من جهة، والأصولية الدينية من جهة أخرى؛ مثل هذا العداء الذي يقضي إلى شيوع النزاعات الأهلية وبين الدينية اللاهائية. تحاول المقالة الحالية التصدي لذلك المأزق عبر النظر إليه باعتباره تحدياً يواجه دور التدين في حياة الإنسان المعاصر. تعتمد المقالة الحالية موقفاً ذا نزعة استمرارية Perennialism تجاه الدين؛ ذلك الموقف الذي يتم ترجمته إلى تواصل مع خبرة الأديان السابقة في مواجهة الحداثة والعلمانية والعدمية والأصولية، كما يتم ترجمته في صورة وعي ثاقب يحاول التعرف على القيم الأخلاقية والأخلاق الدينية العليا في الأديان وبخاصة الإسلام. تحاول المقالة الحالية، عبر اتخاذها هذا الموقف، تقديم بديل لحل المأزق/التحدي الذي يواجه إنسان اليوم عبر الدعوة لحوار وتعاون بين أتباع الأديان المختلفة من أجل اعتماد نظام للقيم والأخلاق المشتركة بين بني البشر كقيم عالمية جديدة يمكنها أن تعطي للممارسة الدينية أبعاداً ذات معاني أعمق أثراً في حياتهم المعاصرة

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A. Introduction

It is no exaggeration when Eric Fromm rightly describes the philosophy of *Homo consumens* as “to *have* more and to *use* more.” In this consuming society, man, “as a cog in the production machine, becomes a thing, and ceases to be human.”¹ In modern era, the greed of *homo consumens* is seen everywhere, in West and East. Because of man’s excessive greed, nature has suffered a lot, as if there is no society that can escape from its imperialistic yoke. If that is the case, why do religions, Islam included, keep rather silent, almost nothing strategic has effectively been done by the so-called religious people to save the world from its future *hara-kiri* because of human excessive greed?² Even worse than that, in modern era, religions, seem, to a very great extent, to have become part of problem, not solution. The question then is: can religions still offer the principles of a new global ethics that are shared by all to improve the unjust and greedy human condition in this planet in which the cultural diversity is a hard fact of history? Here lies the existential and real challenge faced by all religions in our era, as we will elaborate further.

B. Religion as a perennial demand of man and its enemies

Theoretically, I fully and sincerely agree with the belief that religion is a perennial demand of mankind all the time. I can’t imagine a world, for instance, if it is free from the existence of the Transcendental Supreme Being who created and always controls the universe, while He Himself is not part of it. Of course, this is not the realm of the “scientific probability”, but it is completely the realm of metaphysics, or, you may say, “a metaphysical necessity”, as a Catholic philosopher, Étienne Gilson, has correctly put it.³ For a believer, the creation of the universe without the Creator is perfectly absurd and totally unreasonable. But, on the contrary, for a non-believer, or, an atheist, belief in God, the Creator, the Unseen, is ridiculous because it can’t scientifically be confirmed and proved, and therefore it should be rejected. In the Qur’an, the term *kâfir* may also mean a rejecter, an unbeliever, or, an atheist, depends on its context in certain situations.

¹ See Eric Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*. New York-Evanston-London: Harper & Row, 1968, p. 38.

² *Hara-kiri* (a Japanese word: *hara*, belly, *kiri*, cutting), ritual suicide by cutting open the belly.

³ See the end of footnote no. 20 in Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1969, p. 141.

I think the existence of the two or three categories—if we add an agnostic in our discussion—of mankind is also a perennial problem that can't satisfactorily be resolved until the end of the world. From this perspective, the Qur'an fully admits the rights of non-believers, or atheists to coexist peacefully as human beings with believers, or theists. The following verse has clearly confirmed our argument: "And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So, will you then, think that you could compel people to believe?"⁴ In another brief but condensed phrase, the Qur'an says: "There shall be no coercion in matters of faith."⁵ For centuries, throughout Islamic history Muslim rulers, just or unjust, to a very great extent, took the spirit of these verses not to force others to follow the faith of Islam.

Why? From a Muslim perspective, anyone who coerces others to accept his/her religion equals the one who has lost a self-confidence in his own faith. The acceptance of faith through compulsion is no doubt contradictory to the principle of man's free will and free choice that has been ordained by God according, at least, to the above two verses of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is a book of tolerance, more tolerant in many situations than the behavior of certain contemporary Muslims. Like the American Christian fundamentalists who deadly supported Mr. George Walker Bush for presidency in the years of 2000 and 2004, the Muslim fundamentalists of Osama Ben Laden's faction actually follow the same philosophy: "either with us, or, against us. They are trying to monopolize the truth in the name of God to influence and dictate the global public opinion for purely worldly purposes. Their actions are not only dangerous poisoning the efforts of world peace, but in the long run they will dig the grave for humanity as the whole. In the fundamentalist monolithic doctrine, there is no room for tolerance and no place for difference in opinion. The approach they employ to understand the human reality is primarily through a black and white pragmatic philosophy. The hunger for power has made their hearts and minds lame and brittle.

Another kind of fundamentalism is Zionism, the most brutal racist political philosophy in modern era that has deeply shaped the mind of the West, particularly American, for decades. According to Gilad Atzmon, former member of the Israeli

⁴ See the Qur'an sūrat Yūnus (10): 99.

⁵ Muhammad Asad's translation of sūrat al-Baqarah (2): 256 in his *The Message of the Qur'an*. Gibraltar: Dar-al-Andalus, 1980, p. 57. Asad gives a comment on this verse saying: "...that forcible conversion is under all circumstances null and void, and that any attempt at coercing a non-believer to accept the faith of Islam is grievous sin: a verdict which disposes of the widespread fallacy that Islam places before the unbelievers of 'conversion or the sword.'" (See note 249, p. 58).

Air Forces, now living in London as a world class jazz musician, novelist, and thinker, Zionism can't be part of humanity, because its doctrine "aims at turning our planet into a bloody battlefield."⁶ Recently, Gilad spoke out through his vocal voice as follows: "Unlike Karl Popper who was concerned with the battle between the 'Open Society and Its Enemies' the real battle here is between 'Humanity and Its Relentless Enemies,' namely Zionists. In this battle we must win and we will."⁷ I am saying this in front of this influential Catholic intellectual forum just to remind all of us that the idea for initiating the movement of a global ethics, pioneered by Hans Küng, for instance, and hopefully to be shared by others will become a nothingness if we are not aware of the real enemies for the process of world peace. If radical religious fundamentalisms and its most deadly akin Zionism still dictate the politics of modern world, it would be hopeless to save human civilization in near future. Not only believers in various faiths that have to be on the alert to know well the enemies of world peace, but also non-believers and atheists who may become their real victims, consciously or unconsciously.

The failure of religions to cope with the fundamentalist challenge will dramatically reduce their role as the perennial demand of mankind into the corner of insignificance. This is, of course, very dangerous, because without religion human beings will lose the source of the highest standard of ethics and morality. This is actually the true essence of nihilism in which "man", according to F. Nietzsche "rolls from the centre toward X."⁸ What's X? The death of God and the devaluation of the highest values!⁹ In line of this argument, if religions still keep silent to offer the highest values of ethics and morality to humanity, what's then left? There is nothing left, but nothingness *per se*.

From the Qur'anic point of view, once man loses God, he will automatically lose his ownself. We read the translation: "And be not like those who forgot God, and He caused them to forget [what is good for] their ownelves. It is they who are truly disobedient [to God]."¹⁰ Because man is endowed with the capacity of free

⁶ See Gilad Atzmon, "Beyond Comparison" in *Al-Jazeera online*, August 12, 2006.

⁷ See Gilad Atzmon, "Yearning for a Minyan," <http://palesinethinktank.com/2009/06/gilad-atzmon-yearning-for-a-minyan/>

⁸ See Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, tr. by Jon R. Snyder. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, p. 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰ The Qur'an sûrat al-Hasyr (59); 19.

will and free choice, he may be disobedient and rebellious to God. Here lies the fundamental difference between man and nature, since nature has no free will and no free choice but purely to obey God's command. "Hence what is natural command in nature becomes moral command in man," writes Fazlur Rahman.¹¹ The role of religions, from this angle point, is to advise man to follow God's moral command for his own interest and goodness in life. He may accept or reject God's command based on his free will and free choice.

In the meantime, came nihilism to the fore as a new challenge to religions. In nihilism, what we call as God's moral command becomes irrelevant, because man has rolled from the center toward X in Nietzsche's formula as cited above. Though on the surface of American coin there is a phrase "In God we trust," in power politics, I am afraid, the Nietzscheism is more decisive and dominant. Facing this fact, what role can religions play, then? Not much. Besides religions are also preoccupied with their internal complex and unending problems, as schism, sectarianism, and so forth. Being busy in dealing with this internal burden, religious people will hardly have time to think creatively and offer fresh ideas to humanity. The stamina and energy of religions has become exhausted for centuries. This is a very serious challenge we are facing until now.

If this socio-historical phenomenon continues, the role of religions as the highest source of ethics and morality will be in acute trouble, unless the religious leaders and elites have the courage to speak out on the strategic position of principles of universal truth relatively shared by all, as Gilad Atzmon has spoken out on the danger and poison of Zionism for humanity. As for the Muslim nations, they are too fragile to deal with the problem of modernity with all its ramifications. For centuries the Muslims have been widely divided and even fought one another in the name of God. Therefore, they really need ample time to understand the true message of the Prophet Muhammad as the grace for all mankind in connection with the disturbing reality of modern life.¹² Once the Muslims are aware of the true teachings of the Qur'an saying that the doctrine of monotheism needs the recognition of the oneness of humanity and the principles of justice should be felt by all without any discrimination regardless of people's different religio-historical background, they will awaken from their long slumber in order to contribute meaningfully to modern

¹¹ See Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. Minneapolis-Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980, p. 14.

¹² See the Qur'an sûrat al-Anbiya (21): 107.

life in the realm of wisdom, ethics, and morality. At present situation, what the Muslims should do is to open their hearts and minds and learn as much as possible from the success and failure of Judaism and Christianity in coping with the challenge of the time. With this step in mind, the Muslims' self-confidence will hopefully grow gradually but surely and steadily.

C. The believers and history

According to the Qur'an, the historical task of believers of different faiths is not only to serve people, particularly the needy, but also to compete with one another in goodness. And to realize that goal, the first thing they should do is stop quarrelling once and forever on matters of theological differences, and leave them to God to decide in here or in the hereafter. "For every [religious] community," says the Qur'an, "faces a direction of its own, of which He [God] is the focal point. Compete, therefore, with one another in doing good works. Wherever you may be, God will gather you all unto Himself. Verily, God has the power to do all things."¹³ This verse strongly commands the believers of different creeds and denominations to sincerely respect one another and promote the culture of lively, positive, and constructive dialogues, understanding, and cooperation, and again they must stop quarrelling which will only waste time and energy.

That is the ideal world we want to create and build peacefully, and toward that direction we have to move together, though the concrete reality is still far from our moral expectation. More time is still needed for the believers to accomplish their historico-moral responsibility for the goodness of all mankind, but in the long run, I am convinced, we will meet the challenge of the day, provided that we are sincere enough in what we have done and will do for the interest of human species. The relation of faith and sincerity is like the other side of the same coin. So, in all sincerity, let's move together to save the future of human civilizations from the aggressive and relentless assaults of radical fundamentalisms, racist Zionism, and nihilism. Within this religio-moral framework, the interfaith dialogues, understanding, and cooperation are not only possible but absolutely necessary. We have done this very well in Indonesia.

¹³ The translation of the Qur'anic verse in sûrat al-Baqarah (2): 148.

D. Final remarks

The competition of doing good works should become the trade mark of socio-religious activities all the time. Differences in theological matters among believers must be regarded as a mercy, not a curse, in order to enrich our religio-spiritual experiences that also we can exchange from one another. Islam as the youngest religion after Judaism and Christianity—all the three came from the same source, i.e. the Spiritual Office of Abraham—should have no objection to learn much from its predecessors on matters of wisdom in dealing with modernity, secularism, nihilism, and atheism, particularly from what has happened in the Western Hemisphere. Finally, we may get angry with the statement of Bertrand Russell that all religions are harmful and untrue¹⁴, but as a criticism we must accept it to look at ourselves nakedly for the improvement of the quality of our service to mankind. The religions as the main source of the highest principles of ethics and morality only can last long and are respected as long as they are functional in human life in a concrete term. Otherwise, religions will be left as empty rituals and ceremonies, void of a perennial significance and meaning. We do not like this fact to happen on us forever.

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¹⁴ See Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1957, p. v.

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