

RELIGION AND RACISM (A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT FROM MUSLIM POINT OF VIEW)

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Abstrak

Rasialisme dilihat dari perspektif al Qur'an bukan hanya sekedar racun bagi dunia yang berperadaban, tetapi juga merupakan bentuk pelecehan terhadap kehormatan dan derajat manusia. Rasialisme menutup spritualitas manusia dalam meraih posisi yang mulia bagi kemanusiaannya. Rasialisme tidak pernah mati dalam komunitas manusia selama berabad-abad dan penentangan atasnya semakin menguat dan terus semarak belakangan ini. Karena secara prinsipil rasialisme itu tidak sesuai dengan fitrah manusia. Dalam tulisan ini akan dilihat secara kritis seputar rasialisme dengan kaca mata al Qur'an sebagaimana yang dipahami oleh penulis. Bagi setiap muslim al-Qur'an merupakan petunjuk moral untuk menjawab pertanyaan bagaimana harus bersikap dalam kehidupan di bumi yang temporal ini.

الخلاصة

كانت العنصرية عند نظر القرآن ليست سما لهذه الدنيا فحسب بل إهانة لكرامة ودرجة الإنسان. قفلت العنصرية باطنية الإنسان في نيل مكانة العليا لإنسانيته. ولم تكن العنصرية طائفة في المجتمع لعدة قرون وأما اللعن عليها ازداد شديدا في أواخر هذا العصر لأن حقيقة العنصرية لم تكن موافقة بفطرة الإنسان. في هذه المقالة سيبحث الكاتب ناقدا حول العنصرية من جهة نظر القرآن الكريم. إن القرآن لكل مسلم يكون هداية خلقية إجابة للسؤال كيف يتصرف الإنسان في هذه الدنيا.

A. Preface

In the Qurlanic perspective racism is not only a poison for the civilized world, but also a taintful denigration for human dignity and honor. Racism has blocked man's spiritual enhancement to reach a noble position appropriate for humanity. Though racism has never fully died for centuries in certain human communities, the curse against it has plagued widely and become stronger and more alive everywhere in this globe now more than before. At the end the bottom line is should be totally buried deeply once and forever, though it would not be an easy task. Otherwise, prisoned in its deadly continuing and tricky trap humanity would be incapable of breathing. Actually racism was originally uninherent in human nature rather a historical fabrica-

tion. This brief paper wants to make a critical assessment of the problem of racism in the light of my understanding of the Qur'anic injunctions concerning this burning, disturbing, but relevant issue. For the Qur'anic is the moral guidance to Muslims in answering the question: how should I behave in this temporal and terrestrial life?

B. The Qur'anic Doctrine of Monotheism and Its Logical Consequences in Human Collective Life

The doctrine of an uncompromised monotheism (al-tauhid) constitutes, according to the Qur'an, the very core of the Islamic belief system. Any doctrine and practices deviating from this core accordingly should be categorized as unislamic. "Say (o Muhammad): He is Allah, (the) One; Allah-the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of all being; He begets not, nor was He begotten; and there is nothing that could be compared with Him".¹ The doctrine of monotheism must necessarily result in the recognition of the oneness of mankind. And this recognition can only be historically meaningful when the principles of justice, egalitarianism, and brotherhood are manifested in our life. Otherwise, it loses its relevancy and significance to the human trembling and fearful existence as we see at the present juncture. As to the concept of the unity of mankind, the Qur'an has made a clear statement: "Mankind were one community."² In the other words, racism.... In which one group of people denigrates and subordinates another solely on the basis of physical differences with which they are born"³ has no place in Islam. The racism with all its ramifications should, therefore, be classified as part of barbarism.

That humans differ from one another in many ways is a historical fact. They differ physically and mentally, "giving rise to tribalism, nationalism, racism, and every kind of corporate particularism." But the Muslims regard "none of these as constituting grounds for interhuman discrimination."⁴ Islam has from the early period of its history in the 7th century Arabia declared war against any form of racial and ethnic discrimination. "The East and the West, the North and the South, the blacks and the whites, the Asians and the Africans-all were equally the creatures of God, obliged to do His will."⁵

Historically, in term of socio-religious toleration, Islam was much more tolerant toward other faiths. On this point, Bertrand Russell has rightly noted:

¹ See the Qur'an s. 112: 1-4

² See the Qur'an s. 2: 213

³ Jennifer L. Hochschild, 1995, "Racism" in Seymour Martin Lipset (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Democracy*, vol. III, Congressional Quarterly, Washington, D.C. Inc., hal. 1037

⁴ Isma'il R. al-Faruqi and Lois Lamy al-Faruqi, 1986, *The cultural atlas of Islam*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, hal. 159.

⁵ *Ibid*

“The Empire of the Caliphs was much more kinder to Jew and Christians than Christian states were to Jews and Mohammedans. It left Jews and Christians unmolested, provided they paid tribute. Anti-Semitism was promoted by Christianity from the moment the Roman Empire became Christian.”⁶ For a committed Muslim, religious tolerance is part of his belief in the Qur’an since this book has clearly stated that “there is no compulsion in religion.”⁷ Or in another verse the Qur’an says: “And had your lord willed, those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So, will you (O Muhammad) then compel mankind, until they become believers.”⁸ From these two verses, and still there are many others, clearly that the Qur’an has certainly admitted the fact of socio-religious pluralism which, when it is correctly comprehended, will considerably enrich the vision and wisdom of mankind.

And then comes the notion of particularism, which is in it actually positive. But if it is deliberately misused and wrongly understood, it can consequently demolish the house of human brotherhood, something that we are afraid of. Cultural particularism is in essence the manifestation of human natural creative achievement influenced by certain cultural and geographical environment and therefore should be protected and fully honored. Particularism and racism are, in fact, identical in one part, that is, both relate to one person or thing as distinctive from others. But particularism has no connection with the belief in superiority of a particular race, as does racism. From this perspective, one has to tolerate particularism and yet condemn racism because it is no doubt destructive to the principles of justice and egalitarianism.

A.J. Toynbee who was extremely critical of the exponents of racial intolerance in modern era had proposed Islam as a possible solution. This English philosopher and historian wrote: “It is conceivable that the spirit of Islam might be the timely reinforcement which would decide this issue in favor of tolerance and peace.”⁹ If racism prevails, noted Toynbee, “it may eventually provoke a general catastrophe.”¹⁰ Toynbee was really an ardent enemy of racism in all its manifestations.

C. The Role of Religions in the Midst of an Uncertainty

All religions, I am sure, offer an absolute certainty to their adherents. As to the question “What is the meaning of life and death”? Is not a scientific or

⁶ Bertrand Russell, 1957, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, New York: Simon and Schuster, hal. 202

⁷ See the Qur’an s. 2: 256

⁸ See the Qur’an s. 10: 99

⁹ A.J. Toynbee, 1963, *Civilization on Trial and the World and the West*. Cleveland and New York: The world Publishing Company, hal. 182

¹⁰ *Ibid*

philosophical question? To answer this type of question it is solely the authority and realism of religions. Regardless of the decline of the religious influence in our era, we can not imagine the future of mankind without religion and without transcendental anchor. Of course, religions need fresh and creative interpretations. Otherwise, they may become obsolete. In case of Islam, new and fresh interpretations of its doctrines and teachings remain open forever. Under the light of these interpretations, the Muslim hopes that his religion will never be out of date and be able to response the challenge of the ever-changing time and space. With this in mind, Islam will take its necessary role to shape the future and offer certainty to humanity. I think other faiths have the same position and will for sure follow suit.

Then, let's turn to the religious development in its relations to cultural diseases. If we observe closely the socio-moral phenomena of modern era, racism is only one of the many acute threats to religions. Secular humanism, injustice, xenophobia, neo-imperialism, and other cultural diseases are, in my understanding, the true enemies of all religions. Those religions that deliberately side with these diseases, as happened in the past, in my view, should be critically questioned about the authenticity of their claim as true faiths. The Muslim for instance, who does a deliberate injustice to anyone, Muslim or non-Muslims, should be labeled as a pseudo believer.

For a Muslim, Islam is certainly a total way of life in which he finds the final answer of the definition of justice and injustice, of the principles of universal brotherhood and egalitarianism, and of the clear vision of social and racial toleration. But unfortunately, most Muslims today throughout the world have long ignored consciously or unconsciously the fundamental teachings of their religion. Consequently, the Muslims now are not in position to shape the future of mankind in the light of prophetic transcendental values as the Qur'an has strongly required them to accomplish such a mission. We read the following:

"And strive hard in Allah's Cause as you ought to strive (with sincerity and with all your effort that His name should be superior). He has chosen you..., and has not laid upon you in religion any hardship; It is the religion of your father Ibrahim (Abraham)...it is he (Allah) Who has named you Muslims both before and in this (the Qur'an), that the Messenger (Muhammad) may be a witness over you and you be witnesses over mankind."¹¹

The position of the witnesses over mankind has long disappeared from the hands of the Muslim world. Albeit the Muslims outnumber one billion out of the total world population, due to their ignorance and deep slumber for cen-

¹¹ See the Qur'an s. 22: 77-78. The translation of these verses I take from Muhammad Taqiud-Din al Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, 1996, *The Noble Qur'an in the English Language*, Riyadh: Darussalam Publisher and Distributors, hal. 622

turies, the main stream of humanity has ceased to side with them. For how long? There is not a single Muslim at the present has the capacity to answer of it of course still lies in the womb of history. But who knows the other faiths in this conference will help the Muslims to clear a road for them to cope with the future.

D. Closing

According to Islam, the very aim of the creation of mankind with different colors, tongues, racial, and cultural backgrounds is that they may know one another, exchange experience, and live in peace. For this point the Qur'an has made clear to us:

“O men! Behold, we have created you out of a male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Be hold, God is all-knowing, all-aware.”¹²

Knowing one another is the key words here in order that we live in peace, honesty, harmony, and in an everlasting universal human brotherhood.

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¹² See the Qur'an s. 49: 13. The translation of this verse is fully cited from muhammad Asad, 1980, *The message of the Qur'an*, Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus Ltd., hal. 794