

# Myanmar's Religious Crises: Proposed Solution through the Concept of *Muhibbah*

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## Abstract

This article revisits the concept of *muhibbah* applied in Malaysia that constitutionally acknowledge religious freedom; freedom to profess, freedom to practice and freedom to publicize the religion. Besides, in this opportunity also, explanation of Islam and Buddhism will also be elaborated in order to show the mutual understanding between these two conflict religions in Myanmar, thus able in eliminating hatred and consequently promoting peace and armistice pluralistic coexistence. This study is a conceptual analysis, which analyzing the data gathered from textual, contextual and comparative review. Notwithstanding of any solution prepared by scholars, it is hoped that this conceptual research is able to propose the solving idea in the crises of Myanmar today.

Keywords: *Religious Crises; Myanmar; Rohingya; Muhibbah; Peace*

## I. Introduction

Harmonious living in this world seems to be corroding by the unnumbered inevitable crimes, suicides, bombing, corruption, masses killing, genocide and other aggravations that are coming from multiple quarters. Indeed, the world is never deaf and blind in watching the bloody events, hearing the fear screams since the existence of men on this earth. However, by the intellect and sense of humanity instilled in every heart of man, guided by religious tenet, are more than sufficient in terminating all the black episodes of the world and start to promote the beautiful living (Adam et al, 2016).

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It is undeniable that differences as one of the major catalyst factors that ignites the blast of division and abhorrence among human kind. However, collectively, all are merely same and share the identical inner quality to protect humanity. Without having this kind of thinking, a quest to have a harmonious co-existence living is an elusive dream or utopian exaggeration. Thus, for Malaysia - though as a small country, trying in managing the differences of the various backgrounds of Malaysian by promoting the value of *muhibbah*, which was popularized by the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj.

*Muhibbah* which is derived from the Arabic word of *muhibbat*, means love, is denoting the inspiration of Tunku Abdul Rahman in unifying the differences of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other races to be known as Malaysian while preserving the particular uniqueness each of them, especially pertaining to religion and belief systems (McAmis, 2002). According to Kamaruzaman (2010), *muhibbah* is a combination of kinship and togetherness, love and affection, sympathy and empathy, respect and decorum, and much richer and warmer than mere 'tolerance'.

With regard to historically account, among the majority races of Chinese and Indian were immigrants from original homelands, brought by the colonials to work as labor in Malaysia, thus consequently form a society by generations. Therefore, several acts were also amended in protecting the sovereignty of Malays and welcoming the other races to be part of 1 Malaysia agenda. This is proven by the acceptance of the parliament to have representative from various races as long as the welfare of societies and country's affair in a good hand.

Ergo, in this context of discussion, it is thought to be appropriately adopted in neighboring countries especially in a current Myanmar situation, which is also experiencing the multi co-existence societal for its various backgrounds too.

## **II. Myanmar State of Affairs**

Myanmar, which once was known as Burma, shown religious and pluralistic population by having various ethnics such as Shan, Rakhine, Mon, Karen, Karenni and sundries. Meanwhile, in religious background, there are almost 90 percent of 54,584,700 of Myanmar are Buddhist from Theravada denomination, 4 percent are Muslims and Christianity respectively, and remaining are the others; including a small minority of the Jewish population (Burma 2012 International Religious Freedom Report, 2012).

As how implemented in Malaysia which constitutionally put Islam as the official religion of the state, Buddhism in Myanmar is also practiced in such way although does not sanction legally. This is shown by the example of the requirement of Mahn Win Maung in converting to Buddhism with the intention of becoming a third Prime Minister of Myanmar. Besides, the government has continuously funding Buddhist community in establishing academic organizations of Buddha, maintaining pagodas, funding sangha activities, even set up Buddhist shrines at non-Buddhist populations (Shu, 2014).

Although Myanmar is under military ruling, the use of Buddhism seems to be merely a controlling agent for its majority population. This is justified by the report of Shu (2014) pertaining to few cases of Buddhist communities harassed by the government due to unapproved action done by sangha community. However, it is a sadly truth that part of Buddhist sangha is leading the crisis of ethnic cleansing that is taking place in Myanmar, especially on Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine. It is reportedly directed by Ashin Wirathu, a nationalist monk who has successfully ignited a big blast of discrimination over other religions and put highly enthusiasm against the spreading of Islam in Myanmar (Biver, 2014). They have received full support from the government since the act of Buddhist monks benefit the government in the process of reducing the number of 'illegal Bengali immigrant', although they have resided in Myanmar for many generations.

The development of Islam in Myanmar is not led by the special movements or by preachers, but merely by the high-rate of birth among Muslims (Biver, 2014). Thus, officially in 2005, the Myanmar government restricted Rohingya couples in receiving marriage licenses if they could not make an agreement of having not more than two children. Otherwise, a mother may be sentenced to jail up to 10 years for violating the promise (Lindblom, Marsh, Motala & Munyan, 2015).

By the ferocious acts done by Myanmar government towards Muslims such as denying humanitarian aids, burning housing areas, raping Muslim women, killing innocent peoples, rejecting citizenship rights, and other discriminations obviously show the rebellion of this country over the agreed ASEAN Human Rights Declaration of 2012 (Petrova, 2012). Among the passages mentioned in this agreement are the urgency of protecting the rights and freedom of each person without referring to any distinctive qualities, promoting a spirit of humanity, having right of recognition before the laws as well as entitlement to receive protection (ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, 2012).

### **III. Towards Realizing *Muhibbah* Concept in Myanmar**

As how stated by Lynn (n.d.), Myanmar before its independence era, popularized the motto of '*Amyo, Bartha, Thatana*' which denoted, 'Burmese race, Burmese language, and Burmese religion which is Buddhism, has continuously become this region maxim. By this dictum, it is an indefinite ambition in leading Myanmar into amiable, harmonious co-existence living as *muhibbah* is placing the person into the quality of loving and care, and respecting each other in society. This concept does not only lie in the role of societal level, but also towards the nation in guaranteeing safety and well-being of the masses (Kamaruzaman, 2010).

By placing Buddhism as the basis of *muhibbah* installment, Myanmar is able to experience the amicable and cordial living once again for its central teaching of protecting humanity. Meanwhile, mutual understanding is also important to note on in promoting peace. Thus, it is a dire need for Myanmar peoples to learn the beauty of differences, especially in Muslim in order to soothe the existing conflicts.

### **Mutual Understanding of Islam and Buddhism – Towards Mobilizing Peace**

Generally, Muslims are required in putting their concentration on both horizontal and vertical realm; transcendence of Allah as a creator and also on the other side of human responsibilities. Meanwhile, Buddhism stresses only on human and spirituality. In expanding the view of Buddhism, its teaching educates the adherers in taking good care of each other, thus progressively improving the inner elements of self-spirituality. Hence, both religions are deductively cultivating the adherers in handling aspect of the social dimension in a good manner.

Towards establishing peace and curbing all the killings, false accusation, and also rape crimes happening in Myanmar, it is strongly demanded for irresponsible Buddhist to highlight on the five precepts (*panca sila*) of the Buddha's teaching which are quoted Bikhhu (2012); against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. Obviously, incidents in Myanmar do not supposedly occur if the teachings of Buddha are abided by the 90 percent of Burmese. Similar to Islam, it is actually a grave mistake for Buddhist to violate those precepts.

For example, the Quran has clearly stated, "it is as though he slew all men; and whoever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all men; and certainly, Our messengers came to them with clear arguments, but even after that many of them certainly act extravagantly in the land" (Quran, 5:32). This verse indicates clear prohibition for a man from slaughtering, killing or bombing even towards a single person for his sin. Consequently, this act is of equivalent to committing death to the whole masses.

In Islam, first humankind was sent down to earth was Prophet Adam and his wife in order to seek true value of life. This idea differs from Christianity perspective where it teaches this world is a place of suffering and punishment for the wrongdoings of both actions in previous place; paradise. Nonetheless, the role of human beings in this place is commanded to be a vicegerent, a manager to own-self, families, society and for all including animals, plants, minerals and others.

In every aspect of this life, Islam educates Muslim to look around, to use intellects and sound reason, and to refer to holy revelations in guiding men in performing their role as responsible vicegerents. In the meantime, explanation by Buddhism religious books on the concept of man can also path the way in achieving *muhibbah* living. According to Idema (2014) '*manusya*' in Pali and Sanskrit languages used in Buddhism scriptures, is translated as a human. Explained by Dhammananda, both words of '*manussa*' or '*manusya*', derived from Sanskrit word of '*manu*', meaning 'to think', or '*mana*', translated as mind, indicating the ability of human as the only living being that able to develop intellect and reasoning. Additionally, this quality is helping man in distinguishing between good and bad, thus able in nurturing man's action and cultivating spiritual element – even up the stage of Buddhahood.

### **Responsibility and Accountability**

Notwithstanding with both aforementioned religions only, it is a universal understanding of whole religions existed in distinguishing between virtues and vices in this world. This shared idea of doing goods and negating bad deeds is the collective tenets in living this life despite of various divergences.

In Islam, moral codes provided are subject to act upon it and any forms of resisting, exposed a doer in committing sin. For the corrupted and immorality actions, it is required to be punished by the authoritative party (even though repentance has taken place), if the actions involve social affairs. Besides, for every deed, it is on the shoulder of doers to receive rewards of bountiful life or reprisals of hell fire in the next life.

Meanwhile, in Buddhism, accountability for the current life is also affecting the next rebirth which makes impossible to achieve *nirvana*, the highest destiny of the human spirit (Smith, 1991). The state of the next rebirth depends on the intentional past actions or *kamma*, indicates the value of good deeds, justice over the vindictive, malicious and injustice acts committed in the present life (Mills, 1999).

### **Muhibbah Welcomes Differences**

According to Clifford Geertz, religion is functioning as one of many ways in creating sense of this world, and also acting as a blueprint for human conduct cum shaping the behavioral pattern (Cheng, 2012). When religion is not comprehended as it should be, thus the most affected realm of ethical demeanor will be ruined as well.

Looking into the current situation in Myanmar, the whole world is shocked with the fact that Buddhist sangha participates in exterminating the Muslim population of Rohingya instead of upholding the dhamma towards mobilizing peace. This situation for its root and causes is arguably claimed to be the manipulative agenda of British conqueror back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Walton, 2013). In this idea, Nyunt Maung Shein, former United Nations Ambassador claims the Myanmar's problem is more about political play, and it is not owing to crises of religion (Siddiqui, 2015). Regardless of any political reason or other undefined factors, it is still not acceptable for mankind to act violently towards each other, especially when it comes from religious organizations that supposedly play its role in maintaining the peace and harmony of social living.

In implementing *muhibbah* concept, a society has to be guided in distinguishing between exclusive and inclusive elements of each religion. In this way, religious people will not feel offended, and fear by the threat of one religion being assimilated into other teachings. Besides, an exclusive part of religion which also regards self-uniqueness that contributes to existence of variety of religion has to be defended by its peoples. However, the inclusive elements such as guarding the sense of humanity, respecting each other, evaluating self-honor and other moral codes commanded should receive mutual encouragement rather than promoting hatred and

detestation to flatten each other. Henceforth, it is inevitably significant effort towards establishing *muhibbah* in Myanmar by allowing the societies to maintain their religious tenets, faiths, rituals, and at the same time, valuing and compromising any social and religious differences.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

As such, with the adequate understanding of each religious teaching among the adherers, the noble aspiration of establishing *muhibbah* society in Myanmar can be realized. Indeed, humanity is not degrading any religious values and men's ideologies, but shaping the individuals and society towards betterment. It is a pleasant thought to ponder and contemplate the divergences existed in any society. A set of mutual understanding, religious compromise and shared value are among the success factors in fostering wisdom and breeding appreciative value within co-existence society.

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