

# On Faith and Justice

By

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On 25th March 2012, the Islamic Renaissance Front organized a talk entitled “Faith and Justice: Conflict or Convergence” at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia auditorium. The talk was chaired by Boon Kia Meng, a lecturer at Taylor’s college who posed a series of questions to the speakers. The varied nature of the speakers themselves indubitably brought a rich texture to the discussion. N Surendran from PKR and Lawyers for liberty for example discussed about how even though certain aspects of his faith drive his quest for justice in the political and legal spheres, he consciously adopts a secular orientation in his role as a lawyer, advocate and politician. Rev. Dr Hermen Shastri who is the general secretary of the Malaysian Council of Churches and an ordained minister of the Methodist Church brought his great eloquence as a preacher and erudition as a scholar of religion to the discussion acknowledging the various sins committed in the name of religion while emphasizing its important role to play in developing the ‘fullness of a human life’. Ahmad Fuad Rahmat a political theorist with the IRF lamented the type of religious issues (such as *Hantu Bonceng*, the *hijab* and *hudud*) which dominated the public imagination as greater issues of inequality and corruption remained unaddressed. TK Lee of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís in Malaysia also spoke of the nuanced contribution of religion as well as the dangers of its politicization.

The question and answer session with the audience which followed was lively, if brief. Several candid criticisms such as the lack of representation of women and atheists in the panel were brought up as well as the lack of a clear stand on the role of faith and justice. The speakers took the criticism in their stride and while acknowledging the lack of women in the panel, asserted that the purpose of today’s talk was that of discussion to get at fundamental issues and maintain nuance and complexity rather than a debate to establish one position over the other.

The general overview of the discussion itself was to discuss the role of faith in the pursuit of justice. As the oft quoted Marxist aphorism declares ‘Religion is the opiate of the masses’. This can be seen to refer to religion’s role in obscuring reality and the oppressive material conditions which the great masses of the working poor find themselves in. Rather than seeing the social conditions for what they are, religion blunts both suffering and outrage thus dulling both the ability and urgency to ferment social change. This can be seen where other worldly matters such access to heaven or hell dominate the popular imagination and the concerns of the laity.

Not only can religion be obfuscating, but at times can be wholly oppressive as well. Religion has been used as instruments to justify violence, torture and domination by various state powers in different eras. Religion has also been used as identity markers of “us against them”, thus further justifying exclusion and marginalization. Religion has also justified archaic forms of control of women and sexuality in the name of upholding the traditional familial and social mores.

Yet what is also apparent is the ethical tradition existent in all religions. This tradition is formalized in the ‘golden rule’ of mutual reciprocity to treat others how you yourself would be treated. This kindness in human relations and the dignity and stature which religion accords to and sanctifies in the human being can be contrasted with the cold harsh world of exploitation and realpolitik undergirded by an ‘iron cage’ of reason.

Far more than just ameliorating human suffering, historically, religion can also be a source of social change. Although religion has been used to justify slavery, it was John Brown's abolitionist movement which played an uncompromising role to free the slaves. Liberation theology in Latin America also was part of the struggle against oppressive military juntas and many priests, such as Oscar Romero and Helder Camara became part of the moral conscience against the injustices perpetrated by such regimes. With such varied interpretations of faith, why is faith sometimes oriented towards liberation and other times oppressive?

Perhaps in this sense it is useful to think of faith and religion in general akin to other thought systems based on an ethical principle. Human beings are not mere atomised individuals as neoliberal dogma would have us believe but necessarily share social and ecological environments which require ethical norms to protect. When these norms are enmeshed with existential meaning, ethical norms adopt a religious character. However, due to both individual insecurities and manipulation by vested interests of power and authority, religious norms have a tendency to ossify and ritualize devoid of ethical spirit.

When such norms recede into dogma, it is tempting to want to eliminate the whole institution of religion altogether. However, this is not only unlikely, but counterproductive as well. This is as religion is often ingrained in social memory through the bravery and sacrifice of its martyrs, the collective effervescence expressed in its collective rituals and the varying levels of compassion and kindness which motivates a significant number of its adherents. Religion is thus hardly an abstract concept to be readily debunked but a value system deeply ingrained in its followers. In this sense it is important to firstly revisit the critical traditions inherent within religions, a tradition which may not be obvious to outsiders. For example in Amos 5:21-24 there are clear injunctions against mere worship without the spirit of justice:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

Such internal critiques are fundamental to the renewal of the ethical spirit of each religion away from the shells of dogma and ritual. This is especially important as this spirit itself can often be poisoned by the social conditions of its time. An internal soul searching is important to ensure the eternal values of divine justice and compassion remain a potent manifestation of everyday reality.

This has to be supplemented by a second critical aspect: namely the grounding of religion to the issues of the day. This is important for the ethical precepts of religion not to become empty platitudes. One can always declare “Christianity is equitable to women” or “Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance” by referring to certain verses without reference to actual issues. Such proclamations are mere apologias which skirt the uncomfortable questions of reality. Only by contrasting the idealism of our religious values with actual conditions can religious precepts be actualized. In this sense, the discussion showed how the participants' religious values informed their various positions on social injustices such as the Hamza Kashgari issue, economic realities such as poverty and inequality and ecological realities such as Lynas and the role of consumerism on the environment.

It is in this sense in which the conference was most useful to me. Unlike many other interfaith conferences, there were few references to theological text and verses. However, I appreciated how it brought faith closer to the contemporary issues of justice. The discussion with the other participants after the talk also proved to be engaging as we further discussed various issues ranging from secularism, 'evangelical' atheism and sexuality. Though I might not have agreed with all that was said, I fully appreciated the spirit behind such discussions.

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