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Hate Crime as a Barrier to Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: An Analysis of Al-Shahrastani's Methodology in the Study of Religion

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Abstract

Religious tolerance requires commitments from the society comprises of diverse backgrounds of religions, races and cultures. In Malaysia, religions and races are commonly interrelated. Malays are commonly known as Muslim, Chinese are commonly known as Buddhist or Christian. However, under current development, such relations are considered unnecessary since the population of Muslim, as well as other religions – are now involving people across races. Hence, each religion shared different cultures originated from their races. The shared values among the society should become a strength that could ensure the society to live in peace and harmony. The existence of hate crime involving religions are concerning in which it portrays the state of religious tolerance, particularly in Malaysia. Al-Shahrastani in his methodology exemplified religious tolerance that could be emulated. This paper is to significantly address the concern of hate crimes in Malaysia which considered as a barrier in practicing religious tolerance and the approaches used by al-Shahrastani in his practice to instill and improve religious tolerance in Malaysia. The methodology adopted for this paper is the qualitative approach which included literature review and observation. The finding shows that even though hate crimes are a barrier to religious tolerance in Malaysia, there are still possible improvements and suggestions that could be appropriated by emulating al-Shahrastani's thoughts and methodology.

Keywords: Hate Crime, Religious Tolerance, Al-Shahrastani

Introduction

The progress of humanity developed from the most primitive age involving deviation, integrity, guidance and misguidance to the heights of civilization. Throughout the way, divine guidance attended each phase providing appropriate solutions and assistance. The primitive and stereotypical reasoning originated from distorted perception has deteriorated the true teaching of a certain religion. For example, Islam is often mistaken for terrorism. In a Muslim minority country, society has

been prejudicially educated with fear whenever Muslim is on the street. Some would run for their lives due to the fear of the repercussions that will follow.

The association of Islam and making peace is linguistically proven which derived from a Syriac word. It is a religion that calls for peace, charity, humility and service. It is irony for a religion that carries peace in its own name to be associated with terrorism or anything close to it. Islam does not only promote the theory and concept of religious tolerance but also provides various representations in its teaching (Fadzil, 2011). Without a doubt, terrorism is definitely a real threat. However, it is extremely incorrect to associate the words Muslim and terrorist while the facts implore them to do otherwise. Across the globe, Islamophobia does exist. It is a real disease, which is fuelled by inhuman acts of terrorist groups, who did injustice to the name of Islam.

In another perspective, the existence of hate crime involving religion; for example, Islamophobia is not only due to the acts of spreading terror but also because of the half-knowledge of the rest of the world on various Islamic topics. The study found that interfaith dialogue is able to build trust and connect people through a harmonious platform (Mandour, 2010). The hate crimes that happened to Muslims in the various places across the world create a very clear picture of the current state of religious tolerance that affects the world today. It is definitely a form of discrimination that is similar to racism, particularly in a Muslim minority country. This kind of event also occurs in certain countries involving a particular religion recognized as a minority.

According to The New York Times (15/3/2019), Brenton H. Tarrant, the conspirator behind the Christchurch mosque terrorist attack is a 28-year-old bodybuilder and personal trainer from the small town of Grafton, Australia. He was particularly identified as a non-Muslim. Now, the question arises that why a non-Muslim would initiate a terror attack to the Muslims? It is because a terror attack is not about being a Muslim or a Christian or a Buddhist, it just means being vindicated to a particular organization or intention. It is about seeking revenge; ultimately it is not about religion. The association of religion and terrorism is invalid and does not represent each other. The existence of a particular group who are trying to undermine the religious framework and representation of certain religions with extreme acts should not justify the original teaching of religion to be questioned (Fadzil, 2011).

The crime committed by the individual resulting in the death of Makram Ali during congregational prayer at Finsbury Park, London (BBC News, 29/6/2017) and Nabra Hassanen in Virginia (BBC News, 28/11/2018), clearly shows how radicalism and violence are across culture, religion and society. In Malaysia, the event that unfolded at the Sri Maha Mariamman Seafeld temple over a land dispute and its escalation into a racial and religious matter shows how easily a matter can transform violently into a racial and religious issue (Patto, 2019). Malaysia is a unique country with the existence of diverse religions, races and cultures. The interrelation between religions and races undeniably exists, even though under current development, race is proven to not necessarily represent only one religion as well as the religion itself.

Current Development of Hate Crime in Malaysia

Hate crime related to religion is a matter of having perception. Perception is formed through facts that are either valid or inaccurate. If the perception is formed through false facts, it will certainly give a negative effect to the whole opinion. In other words, perception does not necessarily symbolize the reality and often the reality is ignored or neglected because of those perceptions created on a false foundation. This includes the propaganda to aggravate the image of certain religion combined the attitude and actions of the minority which have also increased the negative perception of the religion itself. Through perception, the hatred towards any religion can be translated into various forms and can give bad implications for society and the image of the religion itself.

For example, Muslim's current condition today is normalized by those perceptions and generalization, mainly exposed to or influenced by the media. In any population of a certain community, there would be a minority with different stands or the outliers that do not represent the vast majority. The justification and propagation of hate mongering against Muslims are usually by televising and publicizing of these fringe element within the Muslim community and they are forced to be the ambassadors or the representatives of what all Muslim is about. Islamophobia, in any place, can have significant implications for the lives of Muslims and it also affects socio-economic development including mental and physical states of individuals.

In Malaysia, religious issues involving houses of worship such as mosques, churches and temples are increasingly widespread. This can be clearly seen through the incidence involving a petrol bomb which was thrown to three churches (Utusan Malaysia, 9/1/2010). A significant event that has taken place at the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple which was originally identified as an internal issue involving the management division has resulted in the rioting that killed a life. This is due to religious provocations and racial sentiments associated with the Hindu temple (Harian, 26/11/2018). Since these religious issues are interpreted differently according to their own personal and social interests, it has resulted in disunity among the community.

The effects of hate crime existed in Malaysia has been endured by society across religions, races and cultures. This includes the event involving the murder of a transgender over theft has been misinterpreted as a hate crime due to the rise of hate speech targeting religion in Malaysia (New Straits Times, 3/1/2019). Religion has been repeatedly targeted and accused of authorizing hate crimes involving any issues and groups who go against its original teaching. Under the influence of Western media, society has started to go against each other and using religion as the main cause to allow more hatred and disagreements violently took place which finally destructing the religious institution as well as religious tolerance in Malaysia.

Religious Tolerance in Islamic Perspective

Why, one may ask, does religion stigmatized in this manner? Why religion is viewed and carelessly concluded to be the reason for every individual crime? Why is there so much bias and antagonism against religion within certain crucial segments of society? In certain places, race has always been the ultimate factor to be blamed whenever something uncomfortable happened. It usually involved prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the

belief that one's own race is superior. Hate crime involving religious disputes contained almost similar content, which could possibly acknowledge, for example; Islamophobia, as a new form of racism.

The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Haji Abdullah Ahmad Badawi emphasized the role of religious tolerance to avoid any misunderstandings, malicious elements and hatred among society (Kamali, 2009). Religious tolerance should exist naturally from moral values such as mutual respect, justice and trustworthy. However, the increase of religious issues has been affecting the perception as well as the surrounding environment. For example, the case of apostasy involving Lina Joy gained the attention of the community which results in interfaith polemic (Sabir et al, 2013). Allah SWT mentioned in the Holy Qur'an:

“And do not let the hatred of a people for having obstructed you from al-Masjid al-Haram lead you to transgress. And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is severe in penalty”.

(al-Quran, 5: 2)

“Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly”.

“Allah only forbids you from those who fight you because of religion and expel you from your homes and aid in your expulsion - [forbids] that you make allies of them. And whoever makes allies of them, then it is those who are the wrongdoers”.

(al-Quran, 60: 8-9)

Based on the above verses of the Holy Qur'an, religious tolerance has been recognized as one of the important principles in Islam. The emphasis of religious tolerance existed within the existence of a human being with different backgrounds in religion, race and culture. Allah SWT mentioned in the Holy Qur'an:

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.

(al-Quran, 49:13)

Religious tolerance is a value existed in the core of humanity that must be understood and practiced to ensure the society with different backgrounds in religions, races and cultures could live in peace and harmony. Religious tolerance according to Islamic scholars is to recognize the existence of religious diversity and respect for other beliefs, respecting the right of every individual to embrace and practice their religion for the purpose of achieving peace and harmony in multiracial and religious society (Ramly et al., 2018).

Al-Shahrastani's Illustration of Religious Tolerance

Taj al-Din Abū al-Fath Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim ash-Shahrastani or commonly known as al-Shahrastani is a prominent scholar in the field of comparative religion. His most notable work acknowledged by scholars across the globe is al-Milal wa al-Nihal which contained a strong emphasis of a systematic study of religion. Al-Milal wa al-Nihal is a reflection of al-Shahrastani attitudes in which

distinguish himself from the other scholars of the same field. His methodology is described as an objective way of examining the universal history of religion and humanity (Watt, 2014). Al-Milal wa al-Nihal is also described as a monumental work, presenting the views of all religions and philosophies according to the timeline existed up to al-Shahrastani's time (Watt, 2014).

The study of religion emphasized the interest in understanding religions which is not typical to only modern centuries, in fact, the contributions to the field started way back. The methodology used by scholars from every generation differs from each other. However, the attempts to defend, criticize or interpreting religion is accomplished for a purpose to understand religion, which – under a harmonious platform – would create a society with a better understanding of each other and in a way, would allow them to let moral values such as respect and tolerance to grow. The current development of knowledge, as well as the platform involving interfaith dialogue which has played an important part in instilling such values in Malaysia, proved to have a significant influence in creating peace and harmony at the societal level.

Objective Study of Other Religions

Al-Shahrastani in his work, al-Milal wa al-Nihal outlined an important grasp on his methodology which the emphasis is on studying other religions with a proper understanding and accurate presentation without distortion. This can be seen through his methodology in explaining different parts of religious understanding accordingly. His representation of religious thoughts without inserting any critical observation and conclusion shows his identity and toleration towards the differences in areas that are uncoordinated with his beliefs.

For example, his representation on Buddha explains a lot of his characteristic in dealing with something different from his experience.

Buddha was an ideal human. He was not born, did not get old, and even did not die. He avoided the pleasure of eating, drinking and remained celibate all his life. He was a perfect ascetic and an exemplary model for his disciples. Accordingly, a Buddhist can be defined as a seeker of truth, a practitioner of various ascetic works, and a holder of the deepest sense of inner morality. Buddhist ethical practices include having patience, giving alms, renouncing this world, abstaining from greed and worldly pleasure, and showing compassion for all creatures. Thus, a Buddhist is required to live an ethically correct life. In addition to practicing these ascetic disciplines, a Buddhist is encouraged to pursue spiritual perfection. He must enhance his intelligence and seek a higher existence. By doing so, he can liberate himself from this lower world that is destined to decline, live in the eternal world, and eventually be led to the presence of divine beings. Buddhism places importance on ascetic disciplines and spiritual endeavour (Ramli, Awang, & Ab Rahman., 2018).

Naturally responding to religious fanatics and critical analysis with potential to create a distortion between people across the globe, these methodologies are ultimately synchronized with the idea of religious tolerance in a way to treat the reality as it is, even with variety of understanding that differentiate one to another religiously, culturally or in any reality existed in current time. His stand

to represent other religion according to its authentic sources is an ultimate goal especially for a country that wishes to accommodate people from different backgrounds to ensure the claimed uniqueness are not disgraced by assumptions, false allegations, defamations and disparagement that could be ingenerated by unwillingness of society to be fair to one another.

Phenomenological Method of Al-Shahrastani in His Study

His presentation in *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* is using among these fundamental sources which are the source of revelation, the scholarly works as well as the direct sources such as dialogue and research (Faizal, Fairouz & Fahmi, 2015). Through his study, one thing that is clear on his study of other religious history and thoughts is his acknowledgement and understanding that religions and communities should be allowed to speak for themselves. For example, Al-Shahrastani visited India in the eleven and twelve centuries, regarding Buddhism's standing in India. He attempts to understand the Hindu culture in its own terms, letting the subject matter speak for itself which the main concern is to record facts as they are, without any prejudgments. The visit is not only to ensure that he generates the idea and sources primarily but also believes that the closest references should be made to the authentic scriptures and texts of the religions and the authoritative writings of their scholars. This is because the authentic scriptures will give the most correct information about the religion itself and their scholars are the expert ones in their religion.

Al-Shahrastani envision the study on other religion in a constructive manner which primarily emphasized on knowledge and virtue in seeking as well as presenting certain information fairly. Such virtues like justice and respect are highly interrelated to tolerance involving every level and aspect of current realities today. This approach fails the act of prejudice, injustice, ill-mannered and presumption that could easily distort the unity of society in a country. The acceptance on the differences in any aspect in life should be brought together with the readiness to fairly learn, on the basis of knowledge, about others to ensure that any negativity is inexistence.

Non-Polemical Study of Al-Shahrastani in *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*

Al-Shahrastani in his presentation is very specific, less polemical and particular in explaining religion comprehensively which has opened up space for an objective study. An objective study requires a presentation of the subject matter as it is, without prejudice and presumptions. This attitude is required in practicing religious tolerance in a way to ensure that the society lives in a healthy environment without the existence of any element of hatred which usually is the prerequisite to prejudice and presumptions. Al-Shahrastani in *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* used a dialogical method which specifically referring to his discussions or debates with certain groups such as Batiniyyah, in order to better understand and enable him to present the group as it is (Bashir, 2013). His involvement in this method includes his dialogue with the other scholars to collect as much information through reliable sources in order to maintain its authenticity.

Hate crime in Malaysia involving religion as well as the other subject such as race, commonly begin with false accusations or assumptions which ended up to bring harm, not only to individuals but also to the family and societal institution. Al-Shahrastani in his attitude maintained a civilized manner when it comes to disagreement in terms of religions, cultures, thoughts and perspectives. The ability to instill the sense of respect and acceptance in the existence of people with different interpretations

is required to ensure that Malaysia would not be witnessing another hate crime in the name of religion, race or thoughts in future. The continuation of uncivilized and inhuman acts is among the prime reason and barrier to religious tolerance among society in Malaysia.

Al-Shahrestani in his approaches portrayed the attitudes one should possess in encountering differences and disagreements. His methods emphasized on understanding the differences, through a reliable source in order to ensure the validity of the understanding, without inserting any prejudgments. The absence of prejudgments as well as prejudiced in our values would allow us to fix what is incorrect and in a way, becomes our sources of da'wah which to represent Islam as a religion of peace. Hate crime is a serious act of injustice that breeds from disagreements which were allowed to penetrate the moral values and destructed them in an unhealthy way. Hence, it is important to highlight the significance to instill moral values such as respect and tolerance, which has been illustrated by al-Shahrestani in his approaches to study religions.

Conclusion

Over the years, religious tolerance in Malaysia is affected by misconceptions and presumptions which lead the society to commit hate crimes involving an element of religious disputes. Malaysia has been witnessing continuous disputes regarding the difference in religions, races, cultures and thoughts. The media has portrayed various types of hate crimes across the globe which carries a heavy influence on the societal responses for the same occurrence. Without a strong understanding and moral values, the destruction of society is as easy as how it was televised and publicized. Malaysia is a unique country with religious diversities which allow the society to live together despite the difference in religious practices, races and cultures. For years, Malaysia has proven to be a country with peace and harmony. However, it is difficult to maintain the same understanding for every generation under the influence of globalization. Hence, a strong example is needed to ensure the continuation of such values is instilled at every individual, family and societal level. Al-Shahrestani has provided solutions and remedies through his methodology in conveying messages regarding religious diversities. He avoids the element of religious polemic at any cost in order to ensure the study is objective. He maintained the authenticity of the work by referring the subject matter to the expert in orientation to subject, in order to avoid prejudice and presumptions. Under the same example, hate crimes which are viewed as the barrier to religious tolerance could be diminished through the same framework provided by al-Shahrestani in his work, al-Milal wa al-Nihal.

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