

Possibilities of Religious Pluralism

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Ed. Göran Collste

LINKÖPING STUDIES IN
IDENTITY AND PLURALISM
No. 3

Series Editor: Kjell O: Lejon
Department of Religion and Culture
Linköping University

Published by
LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY ELECTRONIC
PRESS
2005

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LINKÖPING STUDIES IN IDENTITY AND PLURALISM, No. 1

Series Editor: Kjell O. Lejon

Department of Religion and Culture, Linköping University

www.liu.se/irk

Linköping University Electronic Press

Linköping, Sweden, 2005

ISBN 91-85297-43-7 (print)

ISSN 1651-8993 (print)

www.ep.liu.se/ea/iap/2005/003/ (WWW)

ISSN 1651-9000 (online)

Printed by: Unitryck, Linköping 2005

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Institutionen för religion och kultur, Linköpings universitet

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Introduction

Göran Collste

Religions are back on stage! In the global newsroom religiously motivated political actions, campaigns and movements are everyday news. Most nations today are multi-ethnic and multireligious. Some are characterised by conflicts and others by peaceful coexistence.

In the workshop *Possibilities of Religious Pluralism*, arranged by the Department of Religion and Culture the 16-17th of August 2004, scholars from Malaysia and Sweden, representing different disciplinary perspectives met for discussions.

Malaysia got its independence from Britain in 1957. The nation is ethnically and religiously divided. A little less than 60% of the population are Bumibutras (Malay) and Muslim, approximately 30% are Chinese, who are mainly Buddhists, Taoists and Christians, and around 10 % are Indians, mainly Hindus. According to the constitution Malay is defined as a person "...who habitually speaks Malay, is a Muslim and practises Malay customs (*adat*)". Religious affiliation, to be a Muslim, is thus constitutionally connected to the ethnic affiliation of being Malay. Islam is, according to the constitution, state religion but the rights of other religions are also guaranteed.

Sweden is, compared to Malaysia, a secularised society. A small minority of the population regularly attends church services and other religious ceremonies. The Swedish Lutheran church dates back to the Reformation in the 16th century. In 1593 the Lutheran church was established as the church of the state. When the revivalist movements in the 19th and the

beginning of the 20th century, formed their own churches (Methodists, Baptists, Missionary Covenants, Pentecostal etc) Sweden became a multi-faith nation. Due to worker immigration from Southern Europe in the 1950^s and later and refugees from Latin America and former Yugoslavia from the 1970^s and later, the number of Catholics and Muslims increased. Even after the separation of the Swedish church and state in 2000, approximately 80% of the population still belong to the church.

Religious affiliation is often considered as an important factor for identity formation. But how and in what ways? Do, for example, Malaysians consider themselves as primarily Muslims, Buddhists etc or Malaysians? Is there a conflict between these identities? Are value differences and moral views dependent on religious affiliation or are there, basically, common and shared values? How are values and norms mediated in schools, and what values are considered as core values? Are the religious groups isolated from each other, socially and politically or is there an interchange? What are the implications of religious diversity for gender issues and strive for equality between men and women? Does religious affiliation have any impact on economic behaviour so that for example one religious group is more economically successful than another? These questions are crucial for understanding how religious pluralism works in Malaysia and similar questions can also be raised when examining how religious pluralism is influencing Swedish society. An important point with this kind of comparative discussion is that how religious pluralism works in, say, Sweden, can be understood in a new way when comparing it to other societies that share the multireligious

character but have a different history and different social institutions.

This anthology contains contributions to the above-mentioned workshop on religious pluralism. Religious pluralism has implications for different spheres of a society. This diversity is also mirrored in the anthology. Hence, the essays deal with how pluralism affects politics, school, work and the law.

In the first essay, sociologist Reevany Bustami analyses the new Malaysian prime minister's keynote address to the World Council of Churches meeting held in Kuala Lumpur in August 2004. He draws attention to an emergence or perhaps a revival of social paradigm in Malaysia, what is termed, 'ethical rationality'. This is summarised by the trinity of the three I's: integrity, inclusiveness and Islam.

Pluralism, obviously also has implications for management and working life. In her contribution, Malaysian organisation researcher, Elisha Nasruddin, examines pluralism as manifested in the form of ethnic integration within work organisations. The corporate environment is one of the Malaysian government's main channels in addressing ethnic conflicts. In terms of employment, the governmental economic policy emphasised the necessity of equitable placement of Bumiputras in the private sector. The policy encouraged employers to hire more Bumiputras in their companies. The underlying reason for this policy was to take affirmative action measures in order to secure a representative percentage of Bumiputras in the modern sector comparable to the numbers of Bumiputras in the community. But how is the ethnic integration manifest in today's Malaysian work organisation?

Is it possible for different ethnic and religious groups to coexist in one nation? Are

open conflicts between “civilisations” inevitable or is political stability possible even in pluralist societies? Does the existence of irreconcilable religious doctrines in a society exclude the possibility of shared values and moral consensus? These questions are today in the forefront of political philosophy and political ethics. In his essay, ethicist Göran Collste discusses them in connection with religious pluralism in the two nations, Malaysia and Sweden.

Traditionally Sweden has thought of itself as a homogeneous society, also religiously. In the process of modernisation, from the late 19th Century onwards, Sweden became more pluralistic with the emergence of new, free Christian denominations and with the process of secularisation. The way religious education has been organised in the compulsory school in Sweden during the last century can be interpreted as a way of handling this new religious pluralism within this process of modernisation. As a contribution to such an exchange of experiences and ideas theologian Edgar Almén describes the modern Swedish history of handling pluralism within religious education from two perspectives. One perspective is that of how a non-confessional religious education is an attempt to create a common arena that can be trusted by parents from different religious backgrounds, and another that of how a non-confessional religious education can contribute to important goals for the Swedish comprehensive school.

Law, and not least family law, is a social institution affected by religious pluralism. In her contribution, anthropologist Annika Rabo discusses family law and religious pluralism in another plural society, namely Syria. In a country like Sweden there is only one family law applied equally to all living in the country. Syria, and

some other countries in the Middle East, is different. Here we find legal pluralism in family law depending on the religious affiliation of the citizen. In Syria legal pluralism implies a paradox. It protects the rights and the survival of religious minorities, but it also serves to maintain boundaries between religious groups. Family law in Syria thus highlights differences, not only between women and men, but also between religious groups.

Finally, what are the conditions for peaceful coexistence and co-operation between different cultural and religious groups? In his contribution, ethicist Hans Ingvar Roth focuses on factors contributing to a polarisation. Among them are the belief in absolute truth, a blind allegiance to a powerful leader and a belief in a utopian society. But he also marks the conditions for a fruitful inter- and intra religious dialogue. He mentions e g the importance of social and economical equality, the involvement and encounter of laymen, and a well established regime of human rights.

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We acknowledge financial support from SIDA
and The Swedish Research Council as part of the
programme Swedish Research Links

Religious pluralism, Islam and the New Malaysian Prime Minister's Ethical Rationality

Reevany Bustami,
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Malaysia's 2004 general election has been analysed from various perspectives. Perhaps it represents a combination of continuity, weakening as well as resurgence of certain social forces. This paper draws attention to an emergence or perhaps a revival of social paradigm in Malaysia, or what can be termed as 'ethical rationality'. However, it does not submit that this paradigm is revolutionizing society. It merely offers a working hypothesis on an ethical rationality that has been re-strengthened as the new Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, took office on October 31st 2003 and as reflected in the Malaysia's 2004 election, an election which he had won with a landslide victory. Discussions on religious pluralism and Islam are, thus, addressed from this perspective of ethical rationality.

In the milieu of Malaysia's social evolution, political independence and economic sagacity have been central to the nation's developmental paradigms. Nevertheless, with the re-establishment of ethical rationality, these paradigmatic orientations of political economy are pressured to be re-contextualized and re-rationalized alongside a set of principle-centered agendas. Plainly stated, there is a new game in town. And ethics is the name of the game. This

ethical rationality is best summarized as the trinity of the three I's.: integrity, inclusiveness and Islam. These three components are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. Yet, these three I's, more or less, capture the ontological dynamics of connecting Abdullah's thinking with the present social reality in Malaysia.

The holy trinity of the three I's

I. Integrity

It is common knowledge that many Malaysians perceive Abdullah as Mr. Clean. This image worked in his favour during the 2004 election. One of the main developments marking Abdullah's victory was his fight on graft and unethical practices in the country. Even prior to the election, the anti-corruption bureau investigated a number of high profile cases, including one of Abdullah's very own cabinet ministers. His reputation and engagement on this issue has somewhat crippled the opposition. He is seen as a better choice to carry out these efforts. One of the quotes, which reflects his stance on corruption, explains this intercept well - "It is not that we are against the opposition, only that Abdullah makes a better proposition."

His election victory reflects an ongoing support from the general public. It is a strong indication that ethical rationality as a social force is on the rise. If Abdullah's election victory is interpreted in this light, then it signifies that a large percentage of Malaysians are no longer merely content to see a strong and robust economy but are also demanding the use of an integrity compass that aligns material growth to with set of ethics. There is a general feeling that people want the economy to be re-rationalized. Wealth accumulation alone is perhaps

insufficient as a motive in economic development. In fact, some even argue that economic growth is stunted due to inefficiencies and irrationalities resulting from unethical practices.

If there were to be a shift towards an integrity wave, his decades of reputation as Mr. Clean and his strong leadership concerning integrity, have helped him to comfortably ride on a rising tide. Indeed, Abdullah has integrity as his key strategic asset, especially with the recent post-election developments: enforcement of a report card of work performance by the elected Barisan Nasional (BN) parliamentary representatives and the five-year National Integrity Plan (NIP), launched on April 23rd 2004.

II. Inclusiveness

“Work with me, not for me.” This is one of Abdullah’s early quotes that are often repeated. It can be seen as a brand of a more participative ideology. Although the BN coalition has been known to be successful in power-sharing strategies, and in turning competitors and rivals into collaborators, under Abdullah’s administration, there seems to be a sudden boost. There is a sense of heightened drive towards consulting and engaging a wider range of people, organizations and political spectrum.

An example of his inclusive leadership is reflected in the new ministerial line-up. Although there were criticisms that some ministers were retained despite their poor integrity scorecard, the expanded cabinet reflects improved power sharing with various BN coalition parties, and better representation from the younger leaders and women leaders. One might say that the

cabinet has been ethically rationalized to be more politically correct.

The establishment of an independent Royal Commission to oversee and evaluate the performance of the police force is another case in point. The commission not only consists of retired members of the civil service but also experts and representatives of NGOs who are known to be critical of government's policies and practices. This inclusiveness of Abdullah's shows maturity and courage to consult and to embrace the participation of seemingly antagonistic quarters of society. Ethical rationality has in a way begun to penetrate and re-align the evaluative and advisory mechanisms of the government.

It is within this concept of inclusiveness that religious, ethnic and cultural diversity fits in. Since he had only resumed office at the end of 2003, there is limited documentation on his thoughts vis-à-vis religious pluralism. Nevertheless, in his keynote address, aptly entitled '*Dialogue: the key to unity of multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies*', to the World Council of Churches held in Kuala Lumpur on August 3rd 2004, Abdullah has made this topic the heart of his deliberation. Although not limited to this particular speech of his, many of the ideas discussed below are extracted from it. This paper, thus, highlights five key aspects of Abdullah's ideas on religious pluralism:

- i. Religious pluralism is a right for everyone; it must be protected and recognized.
Religious pluralism is an asset; and tolerance is needed to make it work.
A platform based on religious pluralism should be built in order to resolve societal and global problems as well as to foster a better future for

all. This constructive relationship necessitates dialogue and co-operation.

Malaysia can be an example of a place where religious pluralism works or even thrives.

Moderation is an important virtue in ensuring religious pluralism and in preventing hatred and violence.

i. Religious pluralism is a right for everyone; it must be protected and recognized.

The idea of religious pluralism is a right of every Malaysian has been frequently asserted by Abdullah, even prior to the 2004 election. Indeed, he has affirmed that government will assure religious freedom for all and that religious diversity will continue to be protected (Utusan Malaysia, 26/12/03). There is also no restriction for various religions to build their house of worships (Mingguan Malaysia, 14/12/03). He states that, “[a]s the Prime Minister of Malaysia, I am not a leader of Muslims, but a Muslim leader of all Malaysians. Therefore, I have a responsibility not just to my fellow Muslims, but also to Malaysians who profess other religions as well. It is my duty to ensure that their rights are protected, that they are free to practise their faiths, and that they are not persecuted because they are not the dominant majority.” (New Straits Times, 4/8/04).

More importantly, Abdullah argues that recognition of others’ religions should not be a form of compromise, but a religious requirement or duty. This recognition makes a person a better follower of his or her religion (Utusan Malaysia, 26/12/03). He has again applied ethical reasoning by transcending the legal and practical justifications for such a recognition. Instead, he stressed it is ethical for human beings to recognize the religions of others.

Part of this effort, he also emphasizes his duty to spread the message of tolerance especially among Muslims (Star, 4/8/04). He has urged Malaysians to achieve their highest religious aspirations within the context of pluralistic (*majmuk*) society and not to seek a fantasy notion of mono-religion (Utusan Malaysia, 26/12/03). For that reason, religious pluralism is integral to the inclusiveness component of his ethical rationality.

ii. Religious pluralism is an asset to Malaysians and tolerance is needed to make it work.

Abdullah claims that, “... *our strength as a nation comes from our differences. Diversity does not divide us – it unites us and brings us together.*” (New Straits Times, 4/8/04). With this ethnic pluralism as a source of strength, he reasons that people are given the opportunity to exchange ideas in arriving at good decisions. The case in point is his own cabinet which represents diverse ethnic and religious groups (Utusan Malaysia, 26/12/03). He also points to the fact that this is exemplified by Islam and Christianity, whereby recognition of the rights of others, including those of minority religions or different beliefs is part of religious teaching, not just a form of compromise. Once again, the significance of ethical rationality can be seen in this argument. He has also reminded us that since independence, the Malaysian government has been successful in implementing the process of transformation of the problem of pluralism from what has been perceived as a burden to an asset and a strength to the nation, Malaysia (Utusan 26/12/03).

Nevertheless, in order to achieve unity and political stability, tolerance is required (Mingguan Malaysia, 8/2/04). He believes that “*it is important for the citizens of this country to*

realize that tolerance of other religions goes beyond mere co-existence". Tolerance, hence, should translate into the act of *"engaging with one another, creating and sustaining an open dialogue and building permanent bridges of co-operation through mutual participation"* (New Straits Times, 4/8/04). He also underscores the role of the media in ensuring a truly independent nation and in safeguarding the interests of a multi-ethnic society (Utusan Malaysia, 18/3/2000). Tolerance has also been instrumental in shaping the socio-historical fate of Malaysia, yet it also requires perseverance and firmness. *"We Malaysians have worked hard for our peace, harmony and prosperity. We have had to sacrifice and we have had to give-and-take. We have fought terrorism and extremism in all its forms. We have protected our many languages and religions so that our people are free to speak their mother tongues and profess the religions of their choice"* (New Straits Times, 4/8/04).

iii. A platform based religious pluralism should be built in order to resolve societal and global problems as well as to foster a better future for all. This constructive relationship necessitates dialogue and co-operation.

In going beyond the idea of mere co-existence, Abdullah also proposes that an inter-faith co-operation stemming out of this religious pluralism to address common concerns faced by the communities throughout the world. Therefore, antagonism and differences ought to be replaced with dialogue and co-operation. Reaffirming his earlier ideas, he states, *"[l]et us set aside our religious differences and talk about the issues that affect all of us, whatever our faiths. Injustices in the global financial and trading system, the threat to the environment,*

poverty and disease; these issues affect us whether or not we are Muslims, Christians, Buddhists or Hindus.” (New Straits Times, 4/8/04).

He sees that harm caused by globalization and war can be collectively addressed. *“[G]lobalization that benefits the rich and not the poor is a global concern with no regard for the religion of those who are marginalized.”* Furthermore, *“[w]ith all these problems surrounding us, religion must be a beacon of hope. Religion must bring out the best in us and not the worst. War and acts of terror must not be fought in the name of religion. Religion must guide us towards conflict resolution, towards peace, towards a more just and equitable world order”* (New Straits Times, 4/8/04).

Acknowledging that there were periods of war and conflict between religions in the past, Abdullah, however, draws attention to the fact that vibrant cultures and societies had grown when Christianity and Islam interacted constructively. He affirms that when communities became “contact points” or “*interfaces between Islam and Christianity that we saw the emergence of societies that were cosmopolitan, diverse, eclectic and constantly evolving*” (New Straits Times, 4/8/04). He recognizes that Muslims have benefited from such positive engagements. *“Islamic civilization would not have developed as it did without sustained contact with the Judeo-Christian West, and South Asia, South-East Asia and Chinese civilizations”* (Star, 4/8/04)

In taking this inter-faith co-operation to the next level, Abdullah says that, *“[f]or millions in the world today there is little to look forward to. Poverty, natural disasters, war and conflict affect too many. There are solutions to many of the problems that humankind faces today. But*

sometimes the solutions are not forthcoming because we refuse to build an international consensus that can generate the political will for change.” At the end of his address, he made a spiritual appeal, *“We cannot stand before a compassionate God while there is so much we have left undone because we are disunited. There is so much we could do, having received one another, to receive others”* (New Straits Times, 4/8/04). In actuality, he highlights an ethical dimension to the spiritual relationship with God. Indirectly, or perhaps directly, he has expressed that it is wrong to be disunited and non-inclusive and not having done what could have been done.

iv. Malaysia can be an example of a society where religious pluralism works or even thrives.

Although he admits to the strains and dissatisfaction within Malaysia, Abdullah does not hide his pride in the way religious pluralism has turned out in Malaysia. Therefore, on the one hand, he qualifies with the statements: *“I do not want to claim that there are no problems among the different ethnic and religious communities in Malaysia. I do not want to claim that there are no latent tensions and frustrations. There are still very many things that we need to work on”*. On the other hand, he openly and proudly shares his emotions about the Malaysian story of inclusiveness and diversity; *“[b]ut if the world ever needed a lesson in diversity and making it work, I am confident that Malaysia can be a showcase”* (New Straits Times, 4/8/04).

In a different occasion addressing a separate audience in Malaysia, he contrasted the trends of religious antagonism with the form of religious pluralism existing in Malaysia which helps avoid ethnic and religious conflicts. He directs attention to the fact that when the world is

facing campaigns against terrorism, Malaysia shows a good example of tolerance towards religious pluralism. Malaysian society is able to live in an environment of peace and harmony; with people visiting one another during each other's religious festivals, respecting one another and learning about one another's religion. (Mingguan Malaysia, 8/2/04). Indeed, these frequent visits among people of different religious backgrounds continue even during normal days, thus becoming a common tradition (Berita Harian, 24/4/04). This spirit of working together also exists in the political arena. Abdullah cites that the power-sharing model among various ethnic groups has led to peace and political stability, which in turn has empowered the country to cope with economic turmoil in 1997 (Utusan Malaysia, 31/1/04). *"The so-called burden of not having a homogenous society did not destroy us. It brought the best out of all of us."* (Star, 4/8/04).

v. Moderation is an important virtue in ensuring religious pluralism and in preventing hatred and violence.

In elaborating on moderation, Abdullah also distinguishes it with the extremist approach at the opposite pole of the continuum. The following quote, albeit somewhat lengthy, is worthwhile to examine in full.

"[P]romoting moderation is not easy. Many people practise their faith in absolutist terms. To them there is no compromise with others. They also misinterpret the very religion that they profess and claim that there is no such thing as moderation and accommodation, and that the teachings that they believe in must be implemented in a totalitarian way. They refuse to take into account the context of the modern world in which we live. They refuse to

understand that so much of religious teaching is shaped by the context of the society in which it originatedThis is why I believe it is important to call for moderation in our respective religions.” (New Straits Times, 4/8/04).

He also cautions that if moderation were to fail, religions can be “*hijacked by those who promote hatred and violence*” (Star, 4/8/04). Yet, according to Abdullah, events of the past three years, September 11, the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq, have both possessed religious undertones. In addition, the labelling of ‘good versus evil’ is another “dangerous but dominant view’ which needs to be countered for such a view hinders “any middle ground”. In the absence of moderation, these rigid views of fundamentalists who exist on both sides have recast this “into a religious war” (New Straits Times, 4/8/04). In essence, moderation is crucial in building inclusiveness and religious diversity. The opposite is also true; extremism is divisive and unfortunately, religion is its instrument.

III. Islam

Ethics to many Malaysian Muslims is anchored in Islam, for Islam is seen as a way of life, not just a religion. Islam is also regarded as the source of Muslims’ value-systems. However, this does not necessarily imply that Malaysian Muslims are religiously narrow-minded. While Islamic Hudud¹ endorsed by PAS (Malaysia’s Islamic party) which emphasizes on legal-judiciary system is arguably perceived as being strict and legalistic, the Islam Hadhari promoted by Abdullah is portrayed as moderate,

¹ Hudud literally means limitations or rules. In Islamic legal terms, it also means laws set by God that must not be changed or altered by humans.

progressive and inclusive. The interesting fact about this concept is that albeit it has barely been developed, it has shown its potential as a viable and welcoming alternative Islamic approach to life.

In a newspaper interview with Dr Abdullah Zin, the Minister holding the religious affairs portfolio in the Prime Minister's Department, the concept of Islam Hadhari was explored rather extensively (New Straits Times, 6/8/04). Essentially, 'Hadhari' derives from the root word 'civilization'. Therefore, Islam Hadhari implies an approach to building a civilization imbued with Islamic virtues and values. In the interview, the Minister explained that it is a comprehensive approach to development. The guiding principle is *wasatiyah*, which means 'balanced'. When asked, he actually places this concept of 'balanced' above 'moderation' in its importance and accuracy in describing Islam Hadhari. This is partly due to the fact that it seeks to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually and economically strong. It also emphasizes wisdom, practicality and harmony. While there is a tendency for the present Islamic thinking to relate to the past and the Prophet's time, Islam Hadhari incorporates the present as well. In short, Zin states that "Islamic Hadhari is about the creation of a progressive, civilized and tolerant society" Consequently, there may be new interpretations that reflect its flexibility and practicality (New Straits Times, 6/8/04).

Despite the fact that this is relatively newly introduced concept, it may fit into the social reality where people are operationalizing a workable framework which integrates religion and morality into their everyday work and family life. This workability factor of Islam Hadhari is highly relevant since more than fifty percent of Malaysia's population are Muslims.

It can also be argued that more than ever since the events of September 11 and onwards, a large percentage of Malaysian Muslims now desire a religiously credible leadership. If UMNO, the current dominant party of the ruling coalition government were to neglect its Islamic identity and stance, the religiously inclined segment of Muslim voters would shun it and possibly lean towards PAS. They want to see a Muslim leader with religious inclinations and Abdullah personifies these religious qualities. Therefore, to be ethically rational is to be rational from an Islamic standpoint. In this respect, the 2004 election was not an ordinary election. It is a contest to choose an Islamic leader. A non-Islamic leader, even a Muslim by name, would have probably been rejected.

Conclusions and Further Reflections

Although the paper hitherto appears to portray this ethical rationality rather favourably, one would be naïve to think that it would fit in perfectly with Malaysia's social reality. At the economic front, how far would businesses accept that their operations be ethically rationalized? The precepts of ethical rationality and profit maximization are not known to converge too frequently. Some may even say that the twain will never meet. In the political arena, can money be unglued from money-politics without conflict and counteraction? It may not be too hard to imagine that Abdullah's integrity campaign would draw retaliation from various well-entrenched leaders and power brokers as well as from the lower echelons capable of galvanizing grassroots support. Would his power base then experience eventual attrition? Even at the social dimension, unease and discord against ethical demands may become commonplace. Members

of society may undergo psychological civil war battling between ethical living and letting go some not-so-virtuous material comfort and cultural contaminants. Would people be asking how much ethics is too much? Posing and answering this question alone may polarize individuals into opposing camps of liberals and conservatives. With the rise of ethical rationality, conflicts will probably multiply.

In fact, new situations have emerged that may put current religious pluralism and social stability to the test. The friction comes from different groups within Muslim community itself. There has been advice from the *Mufti* Council of Malaysia (the council of head officials for religious affairs) claiming that a particular series of concerts sponsored by a local television network is *haram* (*religiously forbidden*); and hence, should be banned. These concerts are said to lead to Muslims' behaving immorally and neglecting their religious duties. With the current climate of more open debate on religious issues in Malaysia, many may have seen the advice as healthy. The controversy, however, arises from the fact that this advice may turn into *fatwa* or religious edict. The implication is that if the *fatwa* were to be issued, then this ban becomes legally binding. Any violation against it by Muslims can be treated as an offence. Indeed, the *Mufti* (the head official of religious affairs) of the state of Perak has asserted that several other concerts and carnivals are also *haram*, including the *Malaysian Idol* (a popular television program franchised from a foreign network).

Another equally explosive incident involves an article in the official bulletin of the Malaysian Bar (lawyers) Council. The article is seen by some quarters as criticizing Islam, especially when 'dogs' are mentioned in relation

to Muslims' religious practices (Berita Harian, 6/8/04). According to the article, "*[t]rue, dogs may be noisy at times but that is a different issue... As in the case of those developers building mosques in the vicinity of a non-Muslim community, while one recognizes that any community's right to perform its religious obligation by way of using a loud speaker, to some, it is noise pollution created to the annoyance of those residing in the neighbourhood*" (Infoline May-June 2004 quoted from Berita Harian, 6/8/04). The incident occurred as there were members of a particular neighbourhood, perhaps mostly Muslims, who complained about dogs' barking especially at night. The point raised by the article is that the call for prayer is a form of noise pollution not unlike dogs' barking. Some quarters have interpreted this statement as equating dogs to the Muslims' calls for prayer. This comparison was seen as an insult to them. Subsequently, a number of organizations and individuals, including a youth wing of the ruling party (UMNO); the Gurdwara Council representing the Sikh community, ABIM (a national Islamic NGO) as well as the Deputy Prime Minister himself, have come forward in defence of this religious right and refuted the article (Berita Harian, 6/8/04). Some of them have contended that such statements are insensitive or even denigrating to Muslims and Islam as a religion.

These two recent occurrences exemplify the dynamics at work confronting Abdullah's ethical rationality, including his supposed progressive and balanced brand of Islam Hadhari as well as the religious pluralism he wants to foster.

Although many questions have been raised earlier, this paper concludes by not offering answers but posing another set of yet more

critical questions. These questions will need to be addressed if ethical rationality and all its components were to be sustained. Ethical rationality requires the questioning of what practices and structures are considered right or wrong. For that reason, the first question is – what are the issues that can or should be debated and what cannot and should not be debated? In other words, are there boundaries to this questioning? With a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, should cultural and religious sensitivities be considered before allowing free-flowing open debate? In this context of pluralism and ethnicity, Taib (1993) states that clashes can be prevented, if extremism is contained and ‘maturity’ and ‘rationality’ are advocated. He submits that three conditions ought to be developed in order to attain this state of rationality within a plural society: (1) understanding the history and direction of Malaysia’s development, (2) awareness and sensitivity towards surroundings, social obligations and problems as well as emerging perceptions and new patterns of thinking, and (3) ability to reason and forecast based on knowledge and experiences free of trappings of ethnocentrism and emotional manipulation² (85-87).

Building upon the first, the second question is – how should the issues be discussed? Suppose some ‘sensitive’ issues can or need to be examined and debated, are there ways to still have a critical and constructive engagement of such issues, without causing unnecessary problems and unrest in the society? Should a

² Taib argues that human beings and society are living in a static state. The changes that occur are both situational and total; hence members and leaders of different ethnic groups should respond to these changes based on a high level of understanding and care. Emotional reactions, simplistic and shallow thinking, short-cut solutions in reacting to changes are the detonators that ignite conflicts among ethnic groups.

select group of people review certain matters behind closed doors or should the media help in involving members of public in order to democratize and enrich the existing discourse? This is undeniably quite a balancing act. Yet, no matter how challenging it is, this inclusiveness in formulating developmental agendas forms a strong basis not only for political legitimacy within a democratic framework but also for social efficacy at the implementation level. This is one of the main challenges highlighted by Hefner (2001) and other contributing writers in the book *The politics of multiculturalism: pluralism and citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*. As a whole, they agree that in order to realize a common culture that sustains and advances multiculturalism, there needs to be an active civil society and a deliberately honest engagement of the state with society and vice-versa.

The third question revolves around Islam. To risk reiterating its significance in Malaysia, Islam is not merely a religion quietly practised by individuals. Its wings extend beyond the individual and the institution of religion. Kamarulnizam Abdullah (2003) concludes that in relation to the culture of militancy, "*the power circle could not ignore the fact that the phenomenon is in the ascendancy because of their failure to fill some political, social and moral obligations to society. Islam in Malaysia is an important factor not only as a cultural identity but also as a political force that would charter the future of Malaysian policy. Furthermore, in the age of globalization, society is fast learning from others and is able to share similar experiences. What is more, militancy is seen as a viable option to achieve one's religious and moral duties if the status quo remains recalcitrant in its response towards change*".

There are also calls to modernize Islamic institutions and the way Islam is being perceived and practised in Malaysia since it is such a powerful force which can impede development and equality among the people (Musa, 2001, pp67-82).

Hence the third question is – what are the Islamic principles or paradigms that can function as a reference vis-à-vis formulating and evaluating society’s developmental agendas and progress? If the role of Islam has increased in its importance, then the society may want to have a better understanding of it, especially when Islam may have an impact on their political, economic and social lives. Should these guiding principles be clearly defined, publicized, and perhaps formalized in order to help manage misinterpretations and to enable others, including non-Muslims, to access it? This clarification process may also help society to address controversies like the possible banning of any undesirable gatherings through *religious edicts*. However once specified, will these principles be opened to change? Who would have the authority to interpret and define what these principles are. Already some have questioned Abdullah’s interpretation of Islam Hadhari arguing the word Hadhari (civilized) implies that there is such a thing as ‘uncivilized’ Islam. In *Muslim Diversity: Local Islam in global contexts*, Manger (1999) writes, “Turning to the diversity of Muslim beliefs and practices... they all give an impression that there are as many Islams as they are situations that sustain them (17)”. Therefore, in interpreting these principles, the process of choosing who would qualify with what types of credentials belonging to which ‘Islam’ alone can be a source of controversy and conflict.

The fourth question relates to the third one. Should Islam be the overarching framework or should it be subsumed under some other ethical umbrella? Or, is there a third more acceptable alternative with a common platform of guiding principles developed by and accessible to all?

The paramount question may be that of sustainability. Can this ethical rationality, whatever form it takes, survive in a practical world? The paper contends that in the long run, being ethical is probably practical. The opposite is also true. Unscrupulous conduct leads to self-destruction as demonstrated by giants like Enron and WorldCom. Ethical rationality is practical for it provides solution frameworks to what Anthony Giddens (2000) called the 'manufactured risks' resulting from human modernization activities (pp44-45). Ethical rationality is able to delve into issues concerning ecological sustainability, capitalist greed and amorality, religious hostilities as well as social injustice. It can have political resilience as it appeals to the humans' idealism. Ultimately, doing the right thing may be the only sustainable practical solution.

Quality management and ethnic integration

An Abductive Approach to explaining religious pluralism within Malaysian Manufacturing SMEs

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine pluralism as manifested in the form of ethnic integration within work organizations, which implement quality management in Malaysia. It is based on four case studies of Malaysian SMEs (small-and-medium-sized enterprises) within the manufacturing sector. Specifically, the main enquiry is: With quality management practices as the proxy of growth and expansion for SMEs within the manufacturing sector, does ethnicity become as relevant as ever? Adopting abductive logic³, this research attempts to seek a framework of understanding based on social actors' own construction of reality. The outcome

³ Essentially, the abductive approach emphasises the individuals' accounts and explanations regarding their own and other people's actions as the gateway and access to the social world. Consequently, the language of the individuals is crucial in that it embodies the relevant concepts and structure of meanings upon which they construct fragments of explanations or theories about their social world. Researchers, therefore, must integrate these fragments of meanings and interpretations into theories in order to construct a description of their social world. What sets the abductive strategy apart from either inductive or deductive strategies are its standpoints on social life, in that it adopts a relativist view of social reality rather than a single reality, as well as its approaches to develop the understanding of social life, in that social scientific knowledge is to be derived from daily perceptions, meanings and concepts that are socially constructed. Hence, while the inductive approach of Positivism and the deductive approach of the Critical Rationalism tend to neglect perceptions, meanings, interpretations and intentions, the abductive strategy views these elements as the foundation of theorising for social scientific knowledge.

of the analysis shows a number of revealing findings. Indeed, the findings do not show a diminishing role of ethnicity. Instead, the research discovered that ethnicity is as equally important within the corporate environment as it is in the political and social environment of Malaysia--the co-ethnic economy thesis and ethnic networks are as relevant as ever. Nevertheless, deducing from social actors' accounts, the dynamics between quality management and ethnic integration is to be explained via embedded relationships and the embedment argument.

Introduction

Ethnicity and religion are highly intertwined in Malaysia. The composition of religions in Malaysia is made up of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Christianity and some form of Shamanism. The three main ethnic groups are (i) Bumiputra, the indigenous group consisting of Malays, Kadazans, Ibans, and smaller groups (ii) Chinese and (iii) Indians. All Malays are by default Muslims, while the Chinese are Buddhists, Taoists or Christians, and the Indians are Hindus. Hence, inter-ethnic relations, is an important aspect that needs to be discussed when [religious] pluralism is evoked. Religious conflicts would automatically translate as inter-ethnic conflicts, although not necessarily so, otherwise. Instead, often, inter-ethnic conflicts are in many ways a depiction of cultural conflicts. Nevertheless, inter-ethnic conflicts have always been the main issue discussed for the subject of pluralism in Malaysia. If one were to map historical development in Malaysia, it would show that ethnic conflicts have been the source of challenge for peaceful co-existence among these ethnic groups. When conflict arises,

while it might not be specifically defined, in the mind of Malaysians, ethnic-based conflicts between Malays and non-Malays, can at times be perceived as that of between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Ethnicity was and still is the focus of development planning in Malaysia. The towering significance of ethnicity is reflected by the government's previous overarching development plan of New Economic Policy (NEP) with its dual objectives of: (1) eradicating poverty regardless of race and (2) restructuring society to ensure that there is fair ethnic representation in all economic sectors and occupations. Therefore, whenever there are critiques on government development policies, they would almost certainly involve NEP, which inevitably entails discussions of ethnicity.

Ethnicity is also the underpinning factor in the socio-historical context of Malaysia's own development. An integral part of Malaysia's recent history of developmental evolution involves the interplay of different social actors who belong to different ethnic backgrounds. As history unfolded through colonisation, not only were the ethnic groups separated in different geographical locations, but the social actors of dominant political and economic institutions were also divided and controlled by different ethnic groups (Cho, 1990, pp32-34). Each group tends to carry its own ethnic interests; hence, ethnicity has become an influential force in shaping the development agendas. The ethnic composition consisting of 55% Bumiputras, 35% Chinese and 10% Indians dictates that the ethnic minorities are large enough to play a significant role in the political, economic or social spheres. The decisions and actions of the ethnic majority will in some way interact with those of the ethnic minorities; hence, the importance of ethnic

relations. Furthermore, with such demographic statistics, understanding Malaysia's ethnic relations and managing these relations has become the key in legitimizing some political and economic practices⁴.

Last and certainly not least, ethnicity is theoretically problematical, if not a challenging variable, especially in view of the Malaysian milieu. Since the ethnic structures in Malaysia have existed for centuries and were greatly accentuated during the colonial era, they have taken on a logic of their own, independent of class structures⁵. However, there are arguments against having ethnicity as the sole determinant, although the nature of ethnic plurality in Malaysia is still considered vitally important, for example, the view that other processes like modernisation and politicization of the masses are said to be key factors (Hashim, 1983, p xv). Indeed, it is probable that the ethnic structures have been interacting with the class structures to ceaselessly shape the politico-economic realities in Malaysia's history⁶.

The corporate environment is one of Malaysian government's main channels in addressing ethnic conflicts. In terms of employment, the NEP emphasized the necessity of equitable placement of Bumiputras in the private sector. The NEP encouraged employers to hire more Bumiputras in their companies. The

⁴ Gomez and Jomo (1997) point out some authoritarian features of Malaysian government such as 'diminution of powers of (nine constitutional) monarchies' and 'ownership of docile press by politicians and politically influential businessmen' which were being legitimized by the threat of ethnic conflict and the need for political sacrifices and political stability (pp1-3).

⁵ Jesudason (1989) goes to the extent of regarding ethnicity in Malaysia as "...a reality sui generis, and cannot be reduced to class" (pviii).

⁶ See Comber's (1983) chapter on the prelude to May 13th 1969 riot in which he discusses the uneven economic balance linking the class and the race issues, which among others led to the riot of May 13th 1969, hence, leaving a permanent mark on the political-economic history of Malaysia (pp.52-62).

underlying reason for this policy was to take affirmative action measures in order to secure a representative percentage of Bumiputras in the modern sector comparable to the numbers of Bumiputras in the community. Most of the poor are Bumiputras; therefore this approach was consistent with the government's strategy to end poverty by targeting the participation of Bumiputras in the growing modern sector. Since hard-core poverty is concentrated in the rural areas, encouraging the poor to participate in this flourishing sector of the economy would not only minimize the population living in poverty, but also boost the economy for the rural poor.

Since 1990, National Development Plan (NDP) replaced NEP, yet following the same spirit of the latter. Ethnic integration has been promoted and encouraged to flourish, by the Malaysian government, as an important agenda within the business environment. Of relevance to this research, is this question: As businesses in Malaysia grow, expand and become more global, does ethnicity become as relevant as ever? With quality management practices as the proxy of growth and expansion for companies within the manufacturing sector, this article intends to discuss findings within four case studies of SMEs, which represent the backbone of the private sector in Malaysia.

Case studies

Four companies were carefully selected for the study. These companies represent four typologies (see Table 1). These typologies portray a combination of two main quadrants: quality management practices and ethnic integration quadrants. Both quadrants show a high and low degree of manifestations of quality management

practices and existence or non-existence of ethnic integration.

For the purpose of the research, a high degree of manifestation of quality management practices is defined by practices which include either or both: 1) a formal approach towards quality management with the existence of quality policy, written documentation and records in connection with quality-related programmes (such as supplier development programmes, customer relations programmes, employee involvement programmes, etc.); 2) an informal approach towards quality management, as exemplified in three main areas: top management commitment, employee involvement, and customer satisfaction⁷. Hence, a low degree of manifestation of quality management practices is portrayed by the lack of the existence of formal and/or informal approach towards quality management.

Ethnic integration is discussed from the perspective of ethnic composition. It excludes perspectives such as patterns of promotion and composition of ethnic ownership of a particular business. Hence, an SME business is considered to be ethnically integrated, when at least two ethnic groups of employees are hired within a business, with a minimum of 30% representation found for one of the ethnic groups.

The analyses of the combined case studies will compare and contrast existence and non-existence of ethnic integration within companies portraying high and low manifestations of quality management practices.

⁷ The concept of formal and informal approach towards quality management is based on reviews of literature by authors such as Ahire and Golhar (1996), Ahire, et al. (1996), Haksever (1996), Ghobadian and Gallar (1997), Bemowski (1992), Blackburn and Stokes (2000), and previous consultancy research (on SMEs and quality management).

Table 1:
Four typologies of SMEs

<p>Case A: typology I</p> <p>Quality management: Low degree of manifestation</p> <p>Ethnically integrated: Yes</p>	<p>Case B: typology II</p> <p>Quality management: High degree of manifestation</p> <p>Ethnically integrated: Yes</p>
<p>Case C: typology III</p> <p>Quality management: Low degree of manifestation</p> <p>Ethnically integrated: No</p>	<p>Case D: typology IV</p> <p>Quality management: High degree of manifestation</p> <p>Ethnically integrated: No</p>

In table 1, each business case differs in terms of industry which they represent/products, which they manufacture. Case A produces building materials and related products, and has annual sales of RM 8,000,000 and 42 employees. Case B is situated within the paper, printing, packaging and labelling industry. With 210 employees, its annual sales are RM 35,000,000. With 88 employees, case C produces pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, cosmetics and toiletry products. Case D consists of only a total of 20 employees and manufactures household products and appliances.

In terms of ethnic integration, two companies, Case A and Case B, portray some form of ethnic integration with a minimum of two ethnic groups represented. In Case A, there is a 30% representation of Chinese with the majority being Malay employees, while in case B, it is the opposite: a 30% representation of Malays is observed with the majority being Chinese employees. Two other companies, Case C and Case D do not depict employee composition that is ethnically integrated; in both cases, the ethnic composition is mainly Chinese.

Reflections on manifestations of ethnic integration

1. Based on these four case studies, the key to understanding manifestations of pluralism in the form of ethnic integration rests with the embedded relationships⁸. As the company exists in a web of relationships, the push towards having lower or higher ethnic integration in different aspects of the company stems from these relationship dynamics. In particular, two types of relationships, namely company-government⁹ and company-market relationships¹⁰

⁸ Reflections of these case studies are based on the embedment embedded-relationships thesis. This embedded-relationships thesis is indeed not new. Granovetter (1985) asserts that institutions and behaviours of institutions must be examined in the context of their interconnection with the social relations embedded within them. Granovetter terms it the embedment argument, "the argument that behaviour and institutions to be analysed are so constrained by ongoing social relations that to construe them as independent is a grievous misunderstanding" (p53). Focusing mainly on firms, and claiming that sociologists have been sidelined by economists vis-à-vis behaviour within the market, Granovetter applies this embedment theory to explain various issues and problems concerning the firms.⁸

The embedment approach refers to the four relationships which influence the firms' structures and actions. These relationships are (1) *company-government relationships*, including political groups and institutional regulatory agencies, (2) *company-market relationships*, including customers and clientele, (3) *company-company relationships*, and (4) *company-internal-community relationships*, i.e. shareholders, management, employees and non-human resources, such as: technological, capital, material, and land resources.

⁹ Specifically, company-government relationship includes the company's relationships with local and federal governments, political groups and parties, institutional regulatory agencies as well as political leaders and personalities.

¹⁰ Company-market relationship involves the company's relationships with the customers, clientele and the market segment to which customers and potential customers belong. Customers, in this context, may be end-users (consumers) or other companies or government

form the centrifugal force pressuring or influencing the company's ethnic integration practices. The more a company's activities are involved with these two relationships, the more likely will it be ethnically integrated. This is evident in the interaction between these two relationships and company-internal-community relationship¹¹ or company-company relationship¹². The power/pressure within these relationships and the dynamic of interactions will make companies behave in certain ways.

As indicated by the managers, ethnic integration within the company helps them build better understanding and better ties with entities within the government and the customers. These relationships are crucial for it is within them or through them that their organizational interests and goals are met. For that reason, the main source of motivation for the company vis-à-vis ethnic integration originates within these embedded relationships. Therein lies the explanation for pluralism within these companies.

Examples of manifestation of ethnic integration depicting company-government/company-market relationship and the interaction of one with another each, or with company-company/company-internal-community relationship are as below.

departments and agencies, and to a certain extent the **community**, to which a particular company supplies its products and/or services. The agents and actors of these relationships influence one another; and at another level, the relationships shape and intertwine with one another. Nonetheless, the object of paper is to explain, by disentangling the qualitative data, the ways in which each of these relationships affects the companies' quality management tendencies vis-a-vis ethnic integration.

¹¹ Company-internal-community relationship, involves company's relationships with members and elements of its own community. The relationships are with people within or attached to the company (such as shareholders, managers, and employees) as well as with non-human resources, (such as technological, financial, material and land resources).

¹² Although company-company relationship is somewhat self-explanatory, it is structurally complex. It may include a set of relationships, collaboration or a network between a particular company and one or more suppliers, buyers, financiers, financial institutions, potential competitors, or even benefactor companies.

Interaction between Company-Market relationship and Company-Government relationship

“We are in Malaysia. Honestly speaking, having a multiracial group is good for the company because we are dealing with customers who are multiracial too...we build good relations with our customers in the long run...we also consider government’s objective to create more racial harmony in the society....” (case A)

“The marketing manager must relate well with the Bumiputra customers, especially with our government-based clients. I support what our government is doing about building tolerance. In business, tolerance and sensitivity of different cultures is crucial too.” (case A)

Interaction between Company-Government relationship and Company-Internal-Community relationship

“It is very important to move in harmony with the government. This is being strategic. The [human resource] planning is not entirely done within the company...Yes, in quality control we need skilled employees. We have sensitive automated machines. It requires people with specialised [quality-related] skills to handle them. But playing along with the government’s needs is our business agenda. So, we match our training needs with making sure that we are not too imbalanced...it is hard because many of the good ones are Chinese. But, for long-term of this

business, we do our best to hire Malays and Indians.” (case B)

Interaction between Company-Government relationship and Company-Internal-Community relationship

“No matter who owns the company, Chinese or Bumis, you will still need political patronage, political connection to really get into the big league. It is easier if a business is owned by a Malay company or if a Chinese-owned business have a Malay stake in the shares of the company, otherwise the government won’t help [the company]. In our case we show that the top [board of directors] and the employees is a balanced mixed group.” (case B)

2. It is also within these embedded relationships that a company’s motives for quality management practices can be grasped. Standards for quality management need to be established to assure companies’ clientele and the market that the products delivered are of acceptable quality. As a company embed itself into a larger market and clientele, these quality standards will likely become more important. It follows, therefore, that the company’s quality management will have to be better. In essence, the extent of quality management is connected to the degree of embedment in their company-market relationship. This may seem simplistic, but according to the managers themselves, this is the crux of the matter. The company would have to comply with their customers’ demands.

Company-market relationship

“Our multi-racial society is good for achieving our quality goals. Putting the right people into the right job is the key. Different markets and different company partnerships require different strategies.” (case A)

“It [ethnic integration] is the integration of capabilities. It develops the capabilities of the workforce. It’s really great. You know...it offers opportunities for better synergy of skills. Malays, Indians, and Chinese all have different cultural strengths. Why not make full use of it when we relate with our customers. Our local and international clients from India, China, South Africa, and the Arab countries are also from different ethnic backgrounds. The image of quality standards we portray is not only in the product but also in the services. In the end, customer satisfaction is about whether they feel good about us or not.” (case B)

“Pharmaceutical products are manufactured in a sensitive environment. It needs a lot of care and attention. We are promoting new product line-ups to our international market as well. Recently, we’ve just sign up a contract worth a fortune for this company. All the more, we need to maintain and even improve upon our quality standards.” (case C)

“Many of my clients are the government-based companies and the number is increasing. I need to continue guaranteeing quality assurance so that we can maintain long-term relationship. I make a point to always encourage my people about being sensitive to quality improvements. I remind them that the company’s goal is to reach zero defect and all they need to do is to be

attentive to their tasks and reduce errors.” (case D)

3. The dynamics within three embedded relationships, Company-Company, Company-Internal-Community and Company-Market relationships influence the low manifestation of ethnic integration. Three forces are at work in these situations. One stemming from the inner organizational structure and culture; the other two from entities (suppliers and clients) external to the organization. In terms of their association with the suppliers (Company-Company relationship) as well as the customers (Company-Market relationship), the argument is having the same co-ethnics¹³ (in this case Chinese)

¹³ The social reality in Malaysia cannot be explicated with an economic framework alone nor can it be reduced to ethnicity as the primary determinant. It is against this backdrop of complex social existence that we should examine the ethnic economy thesis in order to provide a working framework for the synthesis of class and race. To begin, ethnic economy is said to exist “whenever any immigrant or ethnic minority maintains a private economic sector in which it has a controlling ownership stake” (Light and Karageorgis, 1994, p648)¹³. Bonachich and Modell (1980) define ethnic economy as an economy with self-employed, employers, and co-ethnic employees of any ethnic or immigrant group who create their own sector of employment out of the local market (pp45, 110-11). Co-ethnic members of an ethnic economy are able to tap into what is termed as ethnic resources (such as networks, cultural values, kinship and marriage systems, trust, social capital). Therefore, in practice, in order to support ethnic economy’s entrepreneurial activities, class resources, including capital as well as means of production and distribution, are combined with ethnic resources.

As for market power, industrial clustering by co-ethnics explains the control over selected sectors of trades and professions. In addition, Light and his colleagues (1994) refer to the studies carried out by Wilson and Porter (1980) who conclude that the ethnic economy obtains oligopolistic-like advantages of big firms through the vertical and horizontal expansion via the placing or positioning of co-ethnic sons and son-in-laws into related industries. This industrial clustering is seen in many instances across many localities, such as cities in the US and the UK. By reducing and restraining competition within a particular industry, this pattern of ethnic-related economic behaviour leads to economic closure (the effective hindrance of other non co-ethnics from entering the industry), which has been achieved particularly by many East Asians.

The ethnic networks that emerge within the ethnic economy become a potentially powerful resource for fellow co-ethnics. These networks have the ability to convey valuable business-related insights and strategies and to create the possibility for co-ethnic to obtain preferential purchasing, to penetrate new markets, as well as to build and sustain a significant degree of monopoly. Nevertheless, ethnic economies facilitate the increase of groups’ incomes. When ethnic economies are large enough, they accelerate groups’ economic mobility (Light and Karageorgis, 1994, pp661-3).

The ‘twist’ in Malaysia’s social reality is that the economic power is held by the so-called immigrant ethnic group, while the local ethnic group has been mostly left behind economically. Nevertheless, the ideas of ethnic resources and class resources are useful concepts to evaluate the various social spheres in Malaysia’s development, especially when analysing the corporate world. This ethnic resource perspective may be useful in understanding what the different ethnic groups in Malaysia can offer to one another that may encourage them to co-operate with one another, either within the company or even outside the company.

facilitates the social interaction. This is the same argument for companies scoring high for ethnic integration. There is a general perception that people of the same ethnic group relate to one another better. Indeed, language and cultural commonalities certainly would be less of a barrier for co-ethnics. Another aspect to this is the issue of trust. This is highly relevant within the company's own internal community. The top management needs people whom they trust especially for those holding key positions. In family businesses, family members who frequently belong to the same ethnic group would usually be the ones anointed with this 'trust'. Therefore, due to its orientation towards this tendency or this traditional aspect of relationship, low ethnic integration is portrayed.

It is, thus, through each relationship alone, or combined with another, that pluralism is seen as a weakness or hindrance, or simply a non-issue.

Interaction between Company-Internal-Community relationship and Company-Market relationship

"It [ethnic integration] is the integration of capabilities. It develops the capabilities of the workforce. It's really great. You know...it offers opportunities for better synergy of skills. Malays, Indians, and Chinese all have different cultural strengths. Why not make full use of it when we relate with our customers. Our local and international clients from India, China, South Africa, and the Arab countries are also from different ethnic backgrounds. The image of quality standards we portray is not only in the product but also in the services. In the end, customer satisfaction is about whether they feel

good about us or not.” (case B—repeated from above)

“Speed is important in business. Our ability to respond to customers in the shortest possible time will determine the long-term relationship. Now, if ethnic integrations slows down our response time, it is not good. I have had [Malay and Indian] employees who can’t handle customers’ needs because of miscommunications. Currently, I have the right employee mix. If I integrate all races, I’ll need to spend time training them. I have no time for this.” (case D)

Interaction between Company-Internal-Community relationship and Company-Company relationship

“...but sometimes I hear accusations that companies are not hiring more Malay graduates. We try to be fair. If they apply and they’re good, we take them. If not, too bad. So, government treatment should be fair to all companies, [even if they are not ethnically integrated]... as long as there is no favouritism being practised against the employees, then it should be okay...We need to take care of our business well. So far, our supplier networks are [of] the same race. It is easier to work with Chinese workers who understand my networks, especially when we socialize after business hours.” (case C)

Company-Internal-Community relationship

“You know, this is sensitive; but, I want to get people that I know I can trust. I know I can trust my own people [of similar ethnic group] who have worked with me for 20 years, especially

when we work with the confidential trade secrets about the product development.” (case D)

“Some companies are family business. The style of management is different. You can’t expect these companies to practise quota system [affirmative action] at the higher management. This will be troublesome for them. It’s crazy. I need to keep the business within the family. This is my tradition.” (case D)

Conclusion

What the studies have shown is that indeed, growth and expansion within these SMEs often entail a higher degree of embedment and linkages with a multitude of relationships. What’s more important is that it is through expansion and growth, whereby interactive process takes place with an expanded set of embedded relationships that would witness the implementation of better quality management practices, fostering either pluralism or not, within SME companies in Malaysia.

Nevertheless, pluralism is not an objective for its own sake, within the corporate environment, but it is an outcome of a bigger pursuit. This is the significance of quality management vis-à-vis pluralism and ethnic integration. The line of enquiry helps answer the conundrum whether a company’s growth and organizational development within the present Malaysian social reality would help or hinder this important social agenda called ethnic integration. Indeed, the answer lies with the pressures existing within the embedded relationships. The state of pluralism is not necessarily an accidental outcome. It may vary according to the tendencies and interests of power structure within the network of

relationships. As long as the pressure for ethnic integration exists within them, its pluralistic organizational manifestations will likely be seen.

Is Religious Pluralism Possible?

Göran Collste

In recent years we have seen numerous conflicts, international as well as domestic, when religious antagonism play a role; former Yugoslavia, the conflict between India-Pakistan, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, Iraq, just to mention a few. This development seems to confirm the theory of a clash of civilizations, formulated by political scientist Samuel Huntington.

Is it possible for different ethnic and religious groups to coexist as one nation? Are open conflicts between “civilizations” inevitable or are there possibilities to achieve political stability even in pluralist societies? Does the existence of irreconcilable religious doctrines in a society exclude the possibility of shared values and moral consensus? These questions are today in the forefront of political philosophy and political ethics. In this essay I will discuss them in connection with two cases, religious pluralism in two societies, Malaysia and Sweden.

Obviously, religious pluralism refers to a condition of the existence of more than one religion in a society. Hence, it does not exist in a nation where all the citizens confess one and the same religion, or none at all. Societies that are characterised by religious pluralism can differ depending on the number of religions represented. But they can also differ on the basis of how the religions relate to one another and to the state. Hence, the conditions for religious coexistence are dependent both on the religions and on the state. The religions can be more or less tolerant towards other religions. They can be

more or less willing to enter into a dialogue and more or less aimed at missionary work at the expense of the other religions. However, the possibility of religious pluralism is also dependent on the nature of the state. Is one religion in a privileged position, as in the Lutheran tradition of a national church and in the concept of the Islamic state, or are the religions treated equally? Is the state confessional or is it based on liberal ideals?

As some of the examples or conflicts mentioned above illustrate, whether religious pluralism implies conflict or non-conflict is also often dependent on social and economic factors. Religious affiliation is often on a par with class affiliation and social conflicts are frequently dressed in religious clothes.

Next, I will present some facts about religious pluralism in Malaysia and Sweden and point out some controversy related to this pluralism. Then, I will discuss a few theoretical contributions to the discussion of religious pluralism. I will briefly deal with Huntington's conflict theory. John Rawls presents a more constructive theory of how to understand political and ethical aspects of religious pluralism. After having discussed his theory I will finally raise the question of whether Rawls's theory of an overlapping consensus is helpful in dealing with religious pluralism in Malaysia and Sweden.

Religious pluralism in Malaysia and Sweden

Malaysia got its independence from Britain in 1957. The nation is ethnically and religiously divided. A little less than 60% of the population are Malay and Muslim, approximately 30% are Chinese, who are mainly Buddhists, Taoists and Christians, and around 10 % are Indians and mainly Hindus. According to the constitution a

Malay is defined as a person “...*who habitually speaks Malay, is a Muslim and practises Malay customs (adat)*”. Religious affiliation, to be a Muslim, is thus constitutionally connected to the ethnic affiliation of being Malay. Islam is according to the constitution the state religion but the rights of other religions are also granted.

Ethnicity and religious affiliation is closely connected in Malaysia. The ethnic and religious division also corresponds to economic and social differences. A great proportion of the Chinese population is in business and economically prosperous. In contrast, many Malays work on the land and in the public sector, and the Malay population is on average poorer than the Chinese. Among the Indians one can find both wealthy professionals and poor labourers.

The Malaysian history of ethnic relations has not been without problems. In 1969 unrest caused by conflict between Malays and Chinese led to the deaths of hundreds of people and vast destruction of property. Since then, to avoid a civil war on ethnic grounds has been the overarching goal of Malaysian politics. The Malaysian policy to achieve social stability and avoid conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups has been quite successful. A policy of preferential treatment, favouring Malays, is one instrument in the policy aiming at limiting the economic differences between the population groups.

The fast economic growth that has gained all population groups has helped in maintaining harmonious ethnic relations. But, as Mansor Mohd Noor argues, the harmony is based on fragile ground: “*But the failures to develop and deliver the fruits of development could instead create explosive social conflict and consequently destroy the harmonious fabric of*

the nation as individuals mobilise ethnic identity and group parameters to defend the material and societal esteem to which they have aspired “ (Mansur 1999, p.81).

Sweden is compared to Malaysia a secularised society. A small minority regularly attend church services and other religious ceremonies. The Swedish Lutheran church dates back to the Reformation in the 16th century. In 1593 the Lutheran church was established as the state church. When the revivalist movements in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, formed their own churches (Methodists, Baptists, Missionary Covenants, Pentecostal etc) Sweden became a multi-faith nation. Due to worker immigration from Southern Europe in the 1950th and later and refugees from Latin America and former Yugoslavia from the 1970^s and onwards, the number of Catholics and Muslims increased. Even after the separation of the Swedish church and state in 2000, approximately 80% of the population still belong to the church.

Malaysia offers many clear cut cases of both possibilities and problems of religious pluralism due to its history of coexistence with large groups of confessors from different world religions. But the emergence of pluralism in Sweden has also brought about new issues demanding a reconsideration of the borders of tolerance and recognition. Let me mention a few cases that illustrate controversial cases of religious pluralism in the two nations.

The government of Malaysia has balanced between on the one hand manifesting the dominant rule of Islam and on the other giving Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, Christians and other religious groups a fair treatment. This is eg manifested in the many public holidays celebrating the different religious events. However, this balance between Islamic state and

religious pluralism may result in dissatisfaction from two sides. Due to the fact of the dominant rule of Islam in Malaysia, there is a constant potential tension between the state and representatives of the minority religions. Although there are wide national sentiments and respect for the national symbols (Mansor 1999), there are also signs of antagonisms. When I was interviewing representatives of Buddhist organizations in 2002, they expressed discontent with what they considered as discrimination of Buddhists compared to Muslims and they disapproved of the official policy of preferential treatment in favour of Malays. On the other hand, fundamentalist Muslim groups, organised in the political party PAS, accuse the government of not being enough Muslim.

The Swedish transition from being a Lutheran to a multireligious nation is not without tensions. The discussion has focused on school policy. This is not surprising, considering the importance of school as a fount of culture. When a policy document stating the basic values of school was outlined in the 1980^s there was disagreement on whether Christianity's importance should be explicitly mentioned in the document or not. Swedish school policy has traditionally been uniform. This situation has changed due to the relatively recent possibility to start independent, so called, free schools. Especially the formation of religiously based free schools has led to a lively debate. Both newly formed Christian evangelical and Muslim schools have been accused of not practising a common value basis, for example not respecting equality between men and women, practising flogging and deviating from a scientifically based teaching.

The more evident presence of Muslims in Swedish society has led to a discussion about

Muslim girls wearing scarves (*hijab*) in school. This practice has been questioned with the argument that the scarf is a symbol of female inferiority and a sign of Muslim extremism and fundamentalism.

A very recent debate started when the town council of Sigtuna, a community with a large number of immigrants, decided to include non-Christian holidays on the schedule. Thus, the school children will get time off not only at Christian holidays but also at the celebration of the end of Ramadan and at the Persian New Year. This is an evident sign of a transition from a Christian to multi-religious society.

Religious pluralism implies controversies. How can we formulate morally justified answers to these controversial issues of religious pluralism? Can they be solved in a reasonable and mutually acceptable way?

Conflict or consensus?

One of the most controversial contribution to the discussion of religious pluralism is Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. According to Huntington, in the post cold war world we can expect a new conflict scenario between the great civilizations of the world.

What, then, is a civilization? "*Civilization and culture both refer to the overall way of life of a people, and a civilization is a culture writ large*", writes Huntington. (Huntington, 1991, p.41) And further, "*Civilizations are the biggest "we" within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other "thems" out there*" (ibid. p.43). A civilization is constituted by a common language, history, religion, mores and institutions and provides a basis for the subjective identification of peoples. Huntington maintains

that religion is a central defining characteristic of civilizations and he quotes Christopher Dawson arguing that “...the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest”. (ibid. 47). Among the major civilizations are the “Western” Christian, the Confucian, the Hindu and Islam.

Huntington’s main focus is world politics and international relations. However, his conflict thesis can easily be transferred to multicultural and multireligious nations. Even here - one could argue in line with Huntington’s thesis - we should expect internal conflicts and turmoil.

Huntington’s conflict thesis can be nurtured by Communitarian ideas about the incommensurability of different ideological and moral traditions. According to Alasdair MacIntyre there is no common ground between different traditions. Instead each tradition has its own criteria for rationality and justice (MacIntyre, 1988). Hence, there is little room for dialogue and mutual understanding between representatives of different traditions. Although Huntington speaks of “civilizations” and MacIntyre of “traditions”, one could argue that they basically refer to the same entities; Huntington analysing them from a political point of view and MacIntyre from a philosophical.

However, Huntington’s theory is problematic. First, he tends to generalize in an unjustifiable way. When he describes the conflicts between civilizations there are no nuances. He also presents civilizations as if they were homogeneous entities. He does not take into consideration that there are huge internal differences, for example between a modernist and a fundamental Islamist and between an evangelical, fundamental Christian and modern Lutheran.

Another, and in my view more constructive perspective on religious pluralism is developed by political philosopher John Rawls. His concern is how to develop public reason and common principles of justice in plural societies. He writes:

...our exercise of political power is fully proper when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to the common human reason. (Rawls 1993, p. 137)

Thus, all citizens should be in agreement with certain political principles and ideals. But how is this possible in plural societies where citizens embrace different religious views?

A unity can, according to Rawls, be achieved through, what he calls, an “overlapping consensus” of different reasonable comprehensive doctrines, i.e. world views, philosophies and religions.¹⁴ Albeit pluralism, it is possible to reach an agreement on principles of justice, core values and rights. These values and rights are then anchored in different religions and world views and can thus achieve a broad theoretical support and motivational force.

As one example of an overlapping consensus of different comprehensive doctrines Rawls mentions the support for the so called “difference principle”. The difference principle is one of the principles of justice that are included in Rawls’s theory of justice. It states that, “...social and economic inequalities are to be

¹⁴ Rawls’s concept “comprehensive doctrine” may misleadingly suggest that religions and other world views appear articulate and concise in the real world.

arranged so that they are...to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged..." (Rawls, 1971, p 302). The difference principle can be supported by different comprehensive doctrines. Rawls mentions the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 as a Christian support and Kant's example of the duty of beneficence in support of Kant (Rawls, 1999, p. 155). One could add the duty of alms, *zakat*, as a Muslim support for the difference principle.

Another of Rawls's examples of an overlapping consensus concerns democracy and non-discrimination. With reference to Abdullah Ahmed An-Naim, Rawls discusses Islam's views on equality and political constitutionalism. An-Naim argues that the earlier Mecca interpretation of Sharia (compared to the later Medina interpretation) supports equality of men and women and freedom of choice on matters of faith and religion. Rawls quotes An-Naim:

"An Islamic justification and support for constitutionalism is important and relevant for Muslims. Non-Muslims have their own secular or other justification. As long as all are agreed on the principle and specific rules of constitutionalism, including complete equality and non-discrimination on grounds of gender or religion, each may have his or her own reasons for coming to that agreement."... And Rawls adds, "This is a perfect example of overlapping consensus." (ibid, p.151)

Achieving an overlapping consensus of basic political rights and principles is a necessary condition for social stability in pluralist societies, Rawls maintains. Stability is of course lacking in pluralist societies where one doctrine is privileged. But it is also lacking in societies characterised by a *modus vivendi*, i.e. peaceful

coexistence. Here, only a principle of tolerance binds the different religious groups together as there are no shared values.

However, tolerance is a shaky basis of a society. We can tolerate many things, even what we dislike, as long as it does not restrict our own freedom of action. But, as soon as “the other”, i.e. the confessor of another religion, is considered as a restriction or as a threat, conflict is on the doorstep. As the Malaysian author Wazir Jahan Karim, when discussing tendencies of segregation of religious groups in Malaysia, writes: *“The desire of the individual to stick to his own ethnic group may originate from narrow-mindedness, but results in racism.”* When compromises are the best one can achieve, peaceful coexistence can easily turn into civil war.

In contrast, overlapping consensus implies – what Rawls calls - *“...stability for the right reasons”*. In this case the basic principles governing the society are justified by the beliefs of the citizens and political institutions incorporating these principles

“...tend to encourage the cooperative virtues of political life: the virtue of reasonableness and a sense of fairness, a spirit of compromise and a readiness to meet others halfway, all of which are connected with the willingness to cooperate with others on political terms that everyone can publicly accept.” (Rawls 1993, p.163)

Hence, a principle of mutual respect and a sense of mutual trust must be added to tolerance in order for a plural society to be stable and prosper in the long run.

The advantage with Rawls’s theory is that it both gives due respect to religious and ideological differences, but in spite of these

differences, suggests a way to attain a just and stable plural society. But, one may ask, is this not a utopian dream? Even if one does not accept Huntington's view of a clash of civilisations or MacIntyre's thesis of the incommensurability of traditions one might question the possibility of achieving an overlapping consensus. Rawls has been criticized for not taking value differences seriously enough. For example, James Bohman argues that there are deep conflicts concerning epistemology and ethics between different religious communities which precludes the possibility of one common public reason. In plural societies, the value conflicts "*...are so deep and persistent that no common framework for deliberation and reflection can be constructed without loss or coercion,*" Bohman argues (Bohman 1995, p.263). As examples of deep conflicts he takes followers of Christian Science who refuse medical treatment on the basis of another view of medicine and cure, the Rushdie affair, illustrating vast disagreements concerning tolerance and legal matters, and the discussion about the legal status of Native Americans in Canada and the US (ibid 256ff). As alternative to Rawls's idea of one common public reason he argues for dialogue and public deliberation resulting in compromises between different public reasons.

However, the possibility of consensus in plural societies based on a "common human reason" can be argued for in the following way. First, it is doubtful whether there really are such deep conflicts between different civilizations, cultures or religions as Bohman and others maintain. As for example Amartya Sen shows, the liberal value of individual freedom is not exclusively "Western" but is also found in the history of Confucian, Hindu and Muslim traditions (Sen 1999). Depending on temporary

political and social circumstances they are more or less emphasised in topical politics. Sen's observation is also confirmed in the quest for Global ethics. A result of the comparative studies of religious ethics is the empirical claim "*...that persons throughout the world affirm a certain set of moral values*" (King, 2000, p. 125). These findings support the assumption that the idea of basing political principles and rights in pluralist societies on an overlapping consensus is a realistic option.

Second, when members of different religious groups interact in a society we can, according to Chandran Kukathas, expect a convergence of moral standards. "*Moral standards, like social standards generally, arise out of the interaction of individuals in particular circumstances and contexts*", Kukathas writes (Kukathas 1994, p.14). We choose to act in conformity with what we expect to be other people wishes. When cultures are isolated from each other this will also imply different systems of norms. But when social contacts and social cooperation increase this will lead to a convergence of norms leading to a moral consensus. Kukathas even maintains that "*...the interaction of different cultures might turn out to be a source of moral insight.*" (ibid, p. 16) Thus, if we can assume with Sen and the project Global ethics that religious traditions share some common basic values and with Kukathas that cultural interaction will lead to a moral convergence, Rawls's idea of an overlapping consensus and a common public reason in plural societies does not seem to be utopian.

Is Religious Pluralism possible in Malaysia and Sweden?

We have seen that religious pluralism has caused tensions and controversies in both Malaysia and

Sweden. In Malaysia, the status of Islam is put into question. In Sweden, e.g., where to set the border between common values and religious divergence is discussed in relation to school policy.

Is then religious pluralism possible in Malaysia and Sweden, i.e. is it possible for believers of different religions, as well as for non-believers, to coexist in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust in a stable and peaceful way? Is Rawls's theory of political liberalism helpful in solving tensions and conflicts in religiously pluralistic societies? What implications would his theory have for the present controversies? Should the state really stay neutral in relation to different religions? These are questions that will be discussed in the future of this project.

Although Rawls's theory of overlapping consensus and public reason is fruitful when discussing religious pluralism, there are some limitations to Rawls's theory. In order to get a broader view of these matters, Rawls's philosophical perspective should be supplemented with a sociological one for two reasons. First, his discussion of "comprehensive doctrines" tends to simplify and theorize what it means to be a religious believer. For example, the expression "I am a Christian" might have different interpretations. It can mean – in accordance with Rawls's theory - "I believe in the Christian doctrine". But it may also mean, e.g. "I have chosen a Christian way of life" or even "I am a Swede/European". With the latter interpretations, religious pluralism has more to do with ways of life and identifications than with doctrines. Subsequently, questions of religious pluralism and possibilities of consensus turn either into questions of pluralism or likeness in

life style and moral practice, or conflicting or complementary ethnic or national identifications.

Secondly, a stable religious pluralism based on consensus and mutual respect and trust is not primarily achieved through political, ethical and religious discourse but presupposes – in line with Kukathas’s theory - also meeting places and opportunities for dialogue. When religious groups are isolated from each other, feelings of suspicion and animosity will tend to spread. In contrast, the virtues of tolerance, respect and trust can only be developed and nurtured through personal encounter and increased knowledge of “the other”.

Hence, the possibility of stable religious pluralism in Malaysia and Sweden can be discussed in terms of at least three kinds of pluralism. There is pluralism of doctrines, pluralism of ways of life and pluralism of how and in connection to what one wishes to be identified. Then, stability “for the right reasons” is not only built on public reason that comprehends overlapping consensus. Dialogue, common meeting places, forums for participation and common grounds for identification are no less important for stable pluralist societies.

Two perspectives on the history of the objectives of religious education in Sweden

Edgar Almén

Traditionally Sweden has thought of itself as a homogeneous society, also religiously. In the process of modernization, from the late 19th century onwards, Sweden became more pluralistic with the emergence of new, free Christian denominations and with the process of secularization. The way we have organised religious education in compulsory schools in Sweden during the last century can be interpreted as a way of handling this new religious pluralism within this process of modernization. When we in the late 20th century, because of immigration from countries outside Europe, in our cities and in our classrooms meet people who understand themselves in relation to non-Christian religious traditions, and we have to rethink our way of handling religious pluralism. In doing so we should try to learn both from our own experiences and from experiences in countries which have a longer history of religious pluralism.

As a contribution to such an exchange of experiences and ideas I will try to describe the modern Swedish history of handling pluralism within religious education from two perspectives, that of how a non-confessional religious education is an attempt to create a common arena which can be trusted by parents from different religious contexts, and that of how a non-confessional religious education can contribute to important goals of our comprehensive school.

1. A continuous effort to try to make sure that all parents can trust letting their children take part in the same religious education.

As in most European countries schools in Sweden historically have had close relations to the church. This was true of the medieval cathedral schools and of the first Swedish university, that of Uppsala founded in the 15th century. That was also true when the gymnasial schools were established in the 17th century in cities with cathedrals as a part of organising the Swedish 'empire' of that time, preparing not only clergymen but also judges and officers for the new civil service. The lecturers of the gymnasia got their living as prebendaries of parishes around the cathedrals well into the 20th century and formed the Protestant chapters of the dioceses of the Church of Sweden until the 1930s. The bishop was *eforus* (a kind of inspector) of the gymnasia until 1957.

The Church of Sweden was interested not only in higher education but also in elementary education for everybody. According to the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, every adult baptised person should be a mature Christian with a sound judgement on matters of faith. When the bishop visited the parish, every adult, both men and women, both master and maid, should respond to the question whether the vicar preached the gospel 'purely' or not. Every parent was responsible for the Christian education of his/her children, and hence no one was allowed to marry without approval in the annual examinations carried out by the vicar on Luther's small catechism with its table of duties. So in this 'world of the table of duties' of the 17th-19th centuries it was the responsibility of the master to promote for his household the knowledge of the catechism and

hence the ability to read. And it was the responsibility of the vicar and the church to help the masters to meet these demands. In the 18th and 19th centuries parish clerks often were engaged with a special responsibility for reading classes. In the agrarian society of that time the ability to read was comparatively high in Sweden.

In the first half of the 19th century this old system for elementary education became inadequate. When the fields were enclosed, the villages broken up and farm-hands, male and female moved out of the house of the farmer to small cottages of their own, the world of the table of duties lost its relevance. That was sharpened when the new early industrial villages grew, by rivers and railways. It was very difficult to maintain the old system in the new situation, and if you succeeded in doing that, the old system was still not able to give the education now needed.

The public elementary schools were founded in the 1840s as a way of coping with these difficulties. They were defined by the parliament as a task for every parish (before the tasks of the parish were divided between the tasks of the parish and the tasks of the municipality). The vicar was, as the main officer of the parish and as an academically trained person, given the task of supervising the school and its education. A main task for the school was to continue the education of the old system, preparing for the confirmation of young people, but new tasks were added. More stress was laid also on writing and counting and on subjects such as history and physical training. In the 1870s it became not only a municipal duty to provide opportunities for attending schools but also a duty for every child to do so. The connection to the church and the content of the

curriculum, however, were not very much changed.

Changes in the society of the 19th century were also the beginning of the 'modern' Sweden with its popular movements such as the temperance movement, the Free Church movements and the labour movement. With universal suffrage in 1918 this 'modern' Sweden also seized political power. In this new situation the traditional religious education of the compulsory school became problematic. It was problematic from the point of view of the often anti-clerical Swedish labour movement, and it was even more so from the point of view of the denominations, which didn't accept their children being taught according to the doctrines of the Church of Sweden. Some parents wanted to get permission to start schools of their own with religious education corresponding to their beliefs.

The way Swedish authorities tried to solve this conflict discloses an attitude which since then has grown into a specific Swedish school policy. The unity of the school system was defended when religious unity was lost. Religious education in the national curriculum of 1919 concentrated on the study of the Bible and especially of the New Testament, and understood as something that is common to all Christians and as something promoting understanding between Christians, and to some extent on the study of the history of Christianity. It was explicitly forbidden to use the official exposition of the Small Catechism of Martin Luther as a textbook in public schools. Religious education at school was formally separated from the preparation for confirmation in the Church of Sweden (but the church still recognised it as an important part of the Christian upbringing of young people).

This decision from 1919 was not only a defence of traditional school unity but also a compromise with the Free Churches. School unity was defended out of fear of a segregated society. If all parents could trust the same school, then all young people could be educated in the same milieu, sharing a rich common frame of reference, having childhood friends with backgrounds formed by other opinions and perhaps also by other social conditions. This fear and this dream were important factors behind the evolution of 'the Swedish model', and most Swedes share them, even those who today find faults within that model. Even those today starting 'free schools' (on a larger scale allowed since the early 1990s) mostly argue against segregation and for these schools as a new means to create community and new connections between people.

In making this decision the authorities chose the perspective of the children, not that of the parents. The children were given the right to get a broad orientation about different opinions. The parents were not allowed to organise schools in such a way that their children know of only those opinions their parents decide. Consequently in 1953, when Sweden signed the protocol to the convention of human rights and fundamental freedoms set out by the Council of Europe according to which legal proceedings can be taken against Sweden at the European Court of Human Rights, the Swedish government explicitly declared that it did not accept an interpretation of the right of the parents giving them an unquestioned right to get public support for schools motivated by a request for special religious education (Prop 1953:32). Catholic and Jewish pupils have been allowed to attend special religious education organised by their communities and approved by the authorities in-

stead of the religious education in school. Today, however, most of them take part in religious education in school.

This attitude has led to some further steps. In the 1940s and 1950s the worried parents were not so much those of other Christian denominations but those who did not see themselves as Christians. Could they trust the religious education of the compulsory school? Against any form of Christian indoctrination they wanted objective teaching. In the national curricula of 1962 for the then new comprehensive school and the one of 1965 for the 'gymnasium' this demand for objectivity was heavily stressed for all subjects but especially with regard to religious education. At about the same time the collective morning prayer (mostly of an ecumenical character) was changed into a morning assembly. This could still have a Christian content, but often an ethical question was explored or a poem or a piece of music was performed. These assemblies have since then mostly disappeared, largely for practical reasons, but sometimes you find them arranged within a class in the primary school.

As a consequence of the immigration not only from Western Europe but also from Turkey, Iran, Vietnam etc., more and more Swedes think of themselves as Muslims or, to a minor extent, as Buddhists. Therefore, another step on the same road has to be taken, in which the Swedish school tries to give a religious education which also these new Swedes can trust as parents. Some Muslim 'free schools' are started and in many respects they are run very well. When they are criticised, however, those organising them tend to interpret critical remarks from the outside as another form of hostility to foreigners or of racism and do not understand that the motives behind these remarks can be fear

of segregation and that dream of shared pluralism mentioned above. The consistent restriction on the right of the parents to choose freely the educational milieu for their children is often even more difficult for them to understand, especially if this has as a consequence that a teacher of religious education is given the right to give another view than the parents of their religion. It is not certain if these parents will trust the religious education of the Swedish school. You cannot obtain trust by force. You must be prepared to deal with lack of trust. But from the now traditional Swedish perspective on religious education, such a lack of trust must be judged as a failure.

2. The formulation of the objectives of religious education as part of the elaboration of the objectives of the Swedish comprehensive school.

The development of the Swedish school system since the 1940s (prepared even earlier) is as a whole very consistent. Having two parallel systems, one privileged and one for the people, was already questioned in the late 19th century. In the first half of the 20th century gradually more and more connections and possibilities for passing over from the second system to the first were opened. Now, since 1962, we have a 9 years 'grundskola' or comprehensive compulsory school followed, since 1994, by one 3 years 'gymnasieskola' or upper secondary school with 16 programmes for more than 90% of an age group.

The main document behind this development has been the report of the 1946 School Commission. It stressed two main objectives for the school, that every child should be given the best opportunities to develop his or

her personality and mature towards a rich life, and that every child should get the education needed in order to be able to take an active part as a responsible citizen in the development of our society. It was greatly influenced by progressive educational ideas, and it considered education as one of the most important tools in the social-engineering project of creating a better society. Of course the needs of the industry and of the labour market in general were not neglected. In this educational tradition the main focus was on the problems in our society, how they could be solved, and what kind of society we wanted. The school system was regarded as one important and sometimes the only available tool to use for this along with the welfare system. And the school subjects were regarded as relevant and could defend their space on the timetable as far as they could contribute to these ends. This way of thinking was unquestioned in Sweden for decades but is since the 80s has been questioned, mainly by the conservatives.

This project for a better society of course wanted to create opportunities also for those unprivileged in the old educational system, but it also showed a special concern for those with 'special needs'. It stressed the broad development and maturing of different possibilities of the individual and the richness of getting and cultivating impressions from many different social surroundings. Hence it stressed pluralism, but pluralism as an open milieu with many social relations and with as many traits of common frames of reference as possible. In the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps influenced by the possibilities of a neutral state to build positive relations to the new states in what we later called the third world, it widened its scope to international solidarity and understanding.

In this project religious education became important in many ways. The subject formerly called 'kristendom' (scripture) or 'kristendomskunskap' (religion) was now changed into 'religionskunskap' (religious studies) and a new subject 'samhällskunskap' (social studies) was created. Both of them were emphasised as especially important in relation to the central objectives of the school, and 'religionskunskap' was understood as a main tool both for personal development in general and for the development of a personal view of life, for the promoting of understanding and mutual respect and of enriching the exchange of ideas within society, and for the promotion of international understanding.

In this perspective religious education became again in some respects an ideological agent, now not so much for churches and religious communities as for the school system of 'the Swedish model'. In some respects expectations in the subject were very demanding, in others unreasonable. Some teachers tried to delimit possible tasks and/or to stress the possibilities within the subject to discuss also these expectations and how they influence the views of life of Swedes. Other teachers, often class teachers in the primary school (teachers of all subjects), were at a loss to know what to do.

To some extent this perspective is now questioned and a new stress is laid on certain and measurable knowledge and on school merits valuable on the Swedish labour market and promoting the competitiveness of Swedish industry on the world market. Of course this can change the expectations for religious education. These expectations may also change due to new tensions within Swedish society.

Family law in multicultural and multireligious Syria.

Annika Rabo

Families are central and universal institutions, but there is no simple and universal definition of 'a family'. Family law, widely defined to mean systematic norms and rules to regulate rights and obligations within the family and towards society at large, is found everywhere, but the character of family law, and its relation to 'families', is extremely varied and complex. Family law is typically gendered in that rights and obligations within the family and towards society at large differ between women and men. Family law may reflect how a state organizes and perceives gender relations, but family law may also be used as an instrument to mould (gendered) relations within families. Family law may in a given state be characterized as plural or unified. Most countries today can be classified as multireligious and multicultural where we find a variety of religious traditions (or religions), deeply held beliefs, as well as a great variety of life-styles. In a country like Sweden, however, there is only one family law applied equally to all living in the country. Syria, as well as some other countries in the Middle East, is different. Here we find legal pluralism in family law depending on the religious affiliation of the citizen.

In this article I will discuss the historical background of family law and legal pluralism in the Middle East and the development of family law in Syria. I will also touch on the paradox of Syrian legal pluralism. It protects the rights and the survival of religious minorities, but it also serves to maintain

boundaries between religious groups. Finally, I will bring out Syrian debates concerning legal pluralism in, and reform of, family law.

The Ottoman empire and “family law”

The Ottoman Empire, which lasted for almost five hundred years and which stretched across a vast territory, can be classified as multicultural and multireligious. The basic legal affiliation in the empire was based on religious rather than ethnic classification. Ethnic affiliations were not unimportant, especially after the middle of the 19th century with the growth of various nationalistic movements within the empire, but they had no legal status. Although the vast majority of the Ottoman subjects were, or became, Muslim, there were very large Christian and (smaller) Jewish minorities. Cultural and religious differences in the empire were handled through the development of the so called *millet* system whereby non-Muslims were able to retain considerable autonomy in terms of religious and family affairs. At the same time, the millet system was part of an imperial ideology where status and rank was very hierarchical, especially in the ‘heartland’ of the empire. Non-Muslims were protected and had certain collective rights in the field of civil status, but they were never equal to Muslims.

Until a few decades ago Western research into Islamic family law was mainly based on the study of religious and legal texts. The general consensus was that law was stable, coherent, static and unchanged until the reforms of the colonial or modern period. This is a kind of Orientalism which is similar, although from a different vantage point, to an Islamism which stresses the eternal truth of legal-religious sources (c.f. Rabo 1996a). But research using

historical court cases, instead, show the considerable fluidity and flexibility of ‘traditional’ law concerning marriage, inheritance, custody and property rights, as well as the ability of women to use the courts to further their interests (Meriwether and Tucker 1999).

The systematization and codification of ‘family law’ in the Ottoman Empire began in the end of the 19th century. The Ottoman ‘family law’ was based on the *shari’a*, but it was also influenced by the *Code Napoleon* which sanctioned men as heads of households. Before this period ‘family law’ was extremely fluid for Muslims. Marriage, for example, was considered as any other contract interpreted through the application of Islamic law. The application could be based on any of the four recognized ‘law-schools’ (*madhaaheb*)¹⁵. There were no courts devoted to ‘family law’ or even a perception that ‘family law’ existed as a separate legal entity. Behar, discussing marriage records in an Istanbul quarter between the middle of the 19th and early 20th century, argues for example, that the secular administrative reforms “gave rise to a more resolute application of the *shari’a* in matters of matrimony” (2004:545). For Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire the situation was slightly different since their ‘family law’ was handled through their own religious institutions.

The systematization and codification of family law in the Ottoman Empire must be understood as part of the systematization and codification of other legal fields from the middle of the 19th century in a period of great

¹⁵ The four Sunni ‘law-schools’ are Maliki, Sha’afi, Hanafi and Hanbali. The Hanafi ‘law-school’ was the official *madhhab* of the Ottoman Empire, but Muslim subjects were allowed to follow other law-schools. The term ‘law-school’ must be understood in a very loose way since the *madhaaheb* produced no clear-cut legal principles or legal organization, but rather manuals and a myriad of examples. The law schools were established in very different social contexts, which can still be discerned in how, for example, marriage and divorce are perceived. (Barbara Stowasser, personal communication).

administrative reforms. Commercial law, criminal law and administrative law also emerged as more distinct and separate legal fields at the same time. This, of course, is not unique to the Ottoman Empire. The development of ‘family’ and other kinds of law as distinct legal fields are closely associated with the emergence of modern state-building and the development of new kinds of relationships between citizens and the state. In 1917 ‘Law of the Rights of the Family’ based on the Hanafi ‘law-school’, was passed in order to abolish religious courts and to consolidate state control over the family (El Alami & Hinchcliffe 1996:37).

The family law in Syria

When the Ottoman empire broke up the end of World War I, emerging states like Syria, Iraq and Transjordan/Palestine had thus the basis of both a ‘Europeanized’ (Code Napoleon) and ‘Islamized’ (a codified *shari’a*) law. ‘The family’ emerged as the essential building block of the nation. In the Maghreb countries – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia – and in Egypt and Sudan, the process was the same in the period of European colonization.

Compared to many other countries with a Muslim majority, Syria codified its family law¹⁶ rather early (El Alami & Hinchcliffe 1996:215) A Presidential Decree in 1953, seven years after independence, put forward a comprehensive family law, based mainly on Hanafi jurisprudence. The family law covers all Syrian citizens for issues of inheritance and succession. The ‘state’ family law covers all Syrian Muslims as regards marriage and divorce. The only exception is for the Druze minority,

¹⁶ Family law is actually called ‘law of personal status’ (*qanoun al ahwaal ash-shakhsiyya*) in most Arabic speaking countries.

who like recognized Christian sects and Jews have their own courts to settle issues of marriage, dowry and divorce. The issues of legal pluralism will be discussed below.

The Syrian family law/law of personal status deals in its first part with marriage and betrothal. The importance of a valid contract for the legality of the marriage is stressed. A dowry (*mahr*) is obligatory according to Syrian law, but the law stipulates no upper or lower limits. The law furthermore states that the husband is “obliged to accommodate his wife in a dwelling appropriate to a woman of her status” (article 65), and that if the husband has more than one wife, each is entitled to an accommodation of her own. The husband shall maintain the wife, according to the law, but according to article 73 she loses that right “if she works outside the home without the permission of her husband”.¹⁷ The second part of the law deals with the dissolution of marriage. The marriage is dissolved if the man divorces his wife (*talaq*). The wife may seek judicial dissolution of the marriage on the grounds of a defect of her husband (i.e. impotence or illness), or on the grounds of absence or lack of maintenance. Finally the wife may seek judicial divorce due to discord between the spouses.¹⁸ The Syrian law, finally, has provisions for the wife to seek dissolution of her marriage through payment (*mukhala’a*), whereby the husband grants her a divorce and is compensated in money: usually the dowry.

Hanaan Najmeh, a lawyer and a women’s rights activist, is critical of the development and codification of Syrian family

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that according to this section of the law the husband has no right to divorce his wife if she works without his permission.

¹⁸ A husband may also seek judicial dissolution of the marriage, but since divorce without any specific reason (*talaq*) is his prerogative, he typically does not have to seek judicial dissolution.

law and claims that the lawmakers have chosen legal interpretations that are not in favour of women. In the code it is stated, for example, that all provisions not stipulated in the law will be ruled according to the Hanafi tradition. But when this tradition favours women's empowerment, other legal traditions have been chosen instead. In the 'classical' Hanafi tradition a woman may conclude her own marriage contract once she has reached legal age. But in Syrian law she must be represented by a guardian. This may result in an absurd situation according to Najmeh (2003:17). A female Syrian judge may, according to the law, act as a guardian for a woman lacking, for example, a father to contract her marriage. But this female judge may not herself contract her own marriage!

The family law was amended in 1975 to, among other things, make polygamy more difficult. Through the amendment a judge could stop a man from marrying a second wife without justification¹⁹ and unless there is proof that the man can support two wives. But, according to Najmeh (2003:16), this amendment is totally ineffective since the law made no provisions for penalizing men who broke it.

Legal codification, state feminism and state patriarchy in the Middle East

At the outset it would seem obvious that clear and systematic rules and regulations in family law can be used as an indicator of the rule of law, and even as an instrument to empower women. But in recent decades researchers with social science training have instead come to question the inherent goodness of the systematization of family law (Moors 1999). A fixed family law has

¹⁹ Such justification includes the inability of the wife to fulfil her marital duties. A Syrian woman may insert a clause in her marriage-contract that the husband is not entitled to marry a second wife (Al-Maleh 2003:44). Such a clause is neither legally binding nor recognized in Jordan, although the two countries have a similar legal history and development.

in many cases turned the earlier fluidity and flexibility into institutionalized gender conservatism, as argued by, for example, Najmeh above. But this was not the case everywhere. In Tunisia, for example, there was a radical reinterpretation of the classical sources after independence in 1956. Polygamy was banned because it was said to be against the very spirit of Islam. In Morocco, on the other hand, the systematization of family law of the Maliki legal school underlined the weakness of the conjugal unit. According to Charrad (1990) the new Tunisian regime did not have to balance between strong kin-based communities, and was able to push for reforms, while the situation in Morocco was different.

Until today Sudan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have no codified family law (El Alami and Hinchcliffe 1996) and in these countries we find institutionalized male control over women. Yet Arabi (2001) has shown that the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, the leading jurist of the country, has accepted a form of 'ambulant' marriage whereby the wife stays in her parental house and is visited by her husband, as stipulated by the contract. Such a marriage contravenes the ability of the husband to control the wife, so essential in the gender perceptions of family law in its modern form in most countries in the Middle East.

In some Middle Eastern states, like Kuwait, Morocco or Saudi Arabia state policies pertaining to education and employment underline that women and men have different roles to play in society, and that the natural order is where fathers, brothers and husbands are responsible for the conduct of their daughters, sisters and wives (Rabo 1996b:159). Here we see a patriarchy enhanced and supported by the state. In other states with radical nationalist regimes,

like Tunisia and Syria, educational and employment policies are instead used to stress, that women and men are inherently similar. In Syria, for example, a number of laws were passed in 1949 – before the ‘conservative’ family law was passed - reforming civil life. These granted women all rights as citizens, as well as equality before the law (Najmeh 2003:14). In countries like Tunisia and Syria, there was much talk about the need to modernize society, in the decades following independence. Women were typically said to have an important role to play in this process. These states can be classified as state feminist. But state feminism typically does not imply equality between women and men. The radical nationalists in the Middle East favoured ‘state feminism’ and wanted to abolish the seclusion of women, because secluded women were a “wasted national resource” and not because women and men had equal rights (Kandiyoti 1991:10).

In contemporary Middle East the relationship between ‘state patriarchy’ and ‘state feminism’ and family law and gender equality is exceedingly complex. We find no clear correlation between codified or uncoded family law and state feminism or state patriarchy. In Syria, as stressed by Najmeh (2003:14) women and men are equal in all legal aspects except that of the family. Legal reform and systematization of family law are not in themselves, always an indication of increased gender equality. At the same time the struggles over reforms in family law in the last decade in countries like Algeria, Morocco and Egypt show that family law has become the locus of intense conflict and that public debates on family law and its reform have increased in many countries (Moors 2003). On the one hand there is Western pressure, and pressure from mainly secular

organizations and Human Rights groups to implement reforms (see Women living under Muslim law, Mayer 1991, Yamani 1996). On the other hand there is pressure from religious or Islamic organizations to preserve or even 're-Islamize' family law (Fluehr-Lobban 1994, Buskens 2003).²⁰ Most regimes in the region have tried to halt religious insurgence by stressing the Islamic character of family law (An-Na'im 2002). In these conflicts, and in these debates, individuals and groups striving for family law reform risk being classified as irreligious, or as agents of Western colonialism. Syria is an interesting case because it can be seen as state feminist with a 'conservative' codified family law. At the same time there are provisions for legal pluralism for various religious minorities.

Legal pluralism in Syrian family law

Syria can be characterized as a multicultural and multireligious society. Most citizens are Sunni Muslim, but there are various Muslim and many Christian minorities.²¹ Religion is also crisscrossed or affirmed by ethnic labels like Arab, Kurd, Armenian or Suryoye. Although Syria in many ways can be regarded as a secular country, citizens are obliged to have a religious affiliation. This affects women and men in different and conflicting ways, since children inherit both citizenship and religious affiliation from their fathers. If a Muslim man marries a Christian woman this is legally recognized in Syria, but a marriage between a Muslim woman

²⁰ The Tunisian family law, lauded by many critical of conservative family law in many Arab countries, has since the 1980s been criticized by native oppositional Islamic groups. Ironically, many women in such groups call for a return to polygamy. Fluehr-Lobban (1994:358) underlines that the Tunisian reform in 1954 was a top-down reform and that contemporary opposition to the 'secular' state must be understood in that light. Women have never been particularly politically active in 'secular' Tunisia.

²¹ The religious composition of Syria is in many ways guesswork because there are no official records of such affiliations. But Christians constitute around 12 % divided into more than fourteen sects. Probably 60-65 % are Sunni Muslims, and the Alawites and other Shi'a groups are perhaps 17 % of the population, while the Druze constitute around 6 %.

and Christian man is not recognized, unless the man converts to Islam.

Christian minorities only partially follow the ‘national’ family law.²² However, the law concerning inheritance is the same for all citizens regardless of religion. The rules are rather complicated with different shares for different categories of relatives. Husbands and wives have no joint estate and do not inherit each other in any exclusive way. Generally speaking, women inherit half the share of men.²³

Christians have their own laws pertaining to marriage and its dissolution. For Muslims marriage is a civil contract and there is – at least in theory - a large measure of freedom to regulate the relationship between the parties in the contract itself. For the Christians in Syria, marriage is a religious ritual and the church “interferes directly in the contract” (Barbara 2003:58). The church has to accept the marriage in order for the contract to be valid. Without this acceptance Syrian Christians cannot register their marriage in the Syrian court and will not be legally married in the eyes of the Syrian state. This is in total contrast to Syrian Muslims who are not legally obliged to have any kind of religious acceptance of their marriage. If Christians want to dissolve their marriage, their church has to agree. Without this agreement the couple cannot be legally separated. In principle, for most Christians in Syria, dissolution of marriage can only take place if one of the spouses dies or if a religious court so decides.

²² As stated above, also Jews are allowed to follow their own religious provisions in certain matters. Today, however, there are very few Jews left in Syria. My discussion will be limited to Christians and Muslim minorities.

²³ The law covering certain agricultural land is however different. Following an Ottoman decree of the late 19th century, sons and daughters are supposed to inherit former state land equally. The social practice of inheritance is probably the legal field where law and reality is the most divergent. In many farming communities of both Muslims and Christians, women do not inherit any land at all, and in some urban communities sisters waive their rights of inheritance. In Syria there are many Christian communities where women are strongly discouraged from asking for their rights to inheritance. A Christian woman may marry a Muslim man and retain her religion, as noted above. But as a Christian she cannot inherit her Muslim husband. He, on the other hand will inherit her.

The recognized Christian rites²⁴ have their own courts run by the clergy. They may be assisted by ‘civil’ lawyers, but the rulings are based on the clergy’s interpretation of religious law. In general, ‘Christian’ Syrian family law is considered to be extremely archaic.²⁵ Greek Orthodox law, for example, states that a husband may not only seek dissolution of the marriage if the wife is not a virgin on the night of their marriage, but also if she goes to the public bath with another man, or if she has visited the hippodrome (sic!) without his permission (Barbara 200:63). If one of the spouses changes his or her religion, the marriage can also be dissolved.

Legal pluralism is, interestingly, more limited for Syrian Muslims. Although there are various Shi’a sects in Syria, there is no recognition of Shi’a jurisprudence. All Muslims, except the Druze,²⁶ follow the family law of the state. The Druze are different from other Muslims in that they do not accept polygamy, and that spouses divorced from each other can never remarry one another. All marriages and all divorces have to be accepted by the Druze court run by Druze sheikhs (Hajali 2003:73). Christian and Druze family law in Syria is hence under the control of various religious courts, while the family law of the majority of Muslims is under the control of state-controlled secular courts. A Christian or Druze lawyer or judge may be serving the state court and handling cases involving disputes between a Muslim woman and her husband. But in the religious courts of

²⁴ In Syria historically recognized Christian rites include Greek Orthodox (the largest sect), Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Greek, Armenian and Syrian Catholics, as well as Maronites. Protestants have lately been included as a recognized rite.

²⁵ While research on Islamic family law in an historical and a contemporary context is quite prolific, there is a great lack of research on Christian family law in the Middle East.

²⁶ The Druze, who call themselves the Unitarians (*mawahidoun*) date back to the Fatimid period in Egypt in the 10th century. The Druze are now found in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Israel. In 1953 the Syrian state accepted the family law of the Druze, adopted from the Lebanese Druze community. Some Sunni Muslims in Syria do not accept the Druze as Muslims.

the Christians and the Druze one would never find Sunni Muslim lawyers assisting the litigants. The situation in Syria is thus represents a special kind of legal pluralism, where, paradoxically, the Christians and the Druze have a more 'religious' family law than Muslims. It is paradoxical because in everyday social life in Syria Christians and Druze typically regard themselves as less 'religious' than Sunni Muslims. It is not unknown in Syria, however uncommon, that Christian men convert to Islam to be able to marry another (Christian or Muslim) woman. This is regarded with great distaste in the various Christian communities. Such an action indicates that religion is used in a very instrumental way. But such an action also highlights that Islam and Christianity are not equal in all aspects, despite the constitution of the country. Family law in Syria thus highlights differences, not only between women and men, but also between religious groups.

Legal equalities and legal inequalities

The Syrian state supports the equality between all Syrians regardless of religious background. All Syrians are constitutionally equal. There is no official discrimination on religious grounds. Both Christian and Muslim holidays are recognized by the state and all public offices, schools and universities are closed for major Muslim and Christian feasts. While Fridays is the official day off, Christians working in the public sector may have a few hours off on Sunday to go to church. The Syrian president visits churches and receives various patriarchs and bishops for Christian celebrations, just as he prays in major mosques for Muslim celebrations. Muslim-Christian animosity is thus not fostered by the state, nor expressed in public life. However, in

Syria, issues related to religious and ethnic minorities are exceedingly sensitive. The sensitivities touch both intimate family-life and national politics.²⁷

When the ruling Ba'th party came to power in 1963 its members were heavily recruited from minority communities in rural areas. The aim of the party was to overthrow the Sunni Muslim urban elite, which also had vast landowning interests. Since the 1960s the ethnic and religious composition of the ruling party has broadened. Public employees have joined – or been obliged to join – for career purposes. But at the same time the party members have lost power and influence to cliques that are more secretive and hidden from public view. For decades, public opinion in Syria has claimed that the ruling party, the army, and the secret services are under the control of the Alawite minority.²⁸

The sectarian composition of the Syrian regime and its possible ethnic or religious interests is a highly complex issue, outside the scope of this article. Suffice it to note that the ruling party and the regime have not been successful in the goal to eradicate religious and ethnic differences in Syria. On the contrary, people in Syria, especially in the cities – which are generally multireligious and multiethnic – are exceedingly aware of such differences. They also produce and reproduce these differences through talk in their daily lives. Official policies of negating and ignoring religious differences have instead contributed to turning these sensitivities into vehicles for the presentation of selves and others. In these presentations, in the 'identity' of religious groups gender plays a crucial role.

In official Syria, not only members of all religious groups are equal before the law.

²⁷ The discussion on ethnic and religious minorities and the state is taken from Rabo (2005).

²⁸ For a balanced analysis see Hopwood (1988).

Also women and men are equal in all fields of public life, as noted above. Article 45 of the Syrian Constitution states: *The State ensures women all the opportunities which provide them the full effective participation in the political, social, cultural and economical life, and works to eliminate the restrictions which prevent their development and taking part in the construction of the Socialist Arab society.* Syrian women and men have, for example, an equal right to education, and women and men working for the public sector have equal (and equally low) salaries. Yet, since family law was not reformed at independence (or after that to any significant degree) Syrian women are faced with enormous legal contradictions. All Syrian women, regardless of religious affiliation suffer from patriarchal family law. They are equal to men in public workplaces but unequal to men in the family.

As has been discussed in this article, Syria's legal pluralism respects differences between religious groups. Legal pluralism in family law can be said to contribute to, and strengthen, the survival of Christian religious minorities. Yet, at the same time, legal pluralism contributes to, and strengthens, the boundaries between religious groups. These boundaries, furthermore, function in an unequal manner, both in terms of gender and in terms of religious affiliation. Men and women are not equally free to choose a spouse from another religious community. Muslim men are furthermore in a legally stronger position than Christian men. For this reason some Syrians advocate a total reform of the family law. Such a reform would mean that the 'religious' aspect of civil identity would disappear. Muslim and Christian women and men would thus have equal possibilities to marry a partner with another religious affiliation. It

would also be possible to neglect one's religious identity. A total reform of the family law could also, perhaps, enable women and men to have equal rights to divorce and to custody of children and equality in inheritance.

Few Syrians, however, advocate such a radical reform. Many Christians and Druze fear that such a reform would lead to a loss of minority identities. They fear that marriage across religious divides would result in a sharp decrease in numbers among the minorities. Muslims commonly think that the Syrian (state) family law is divine and the only legal field 'left' where *shari'a* is applied. They have no knowledge of the development and modernization of family law and instead fear any 'secular' reform of family law. Thus the majority and the minorities in Syria today share the same fear of a truly secular civil identity. Women and men are joined in these worries.

In Syria, hence, most people debating legal reform advocate a slower step-by-step process. Hanan Najmeh was in 2003 among the organizers lobbying to amend the law concerning custody of children. The amendments would make it possible for both boys and girls to stay with their mother until the age of 15.²⁹ After that age they would be able to choose which parent to live with. This would mean that a mother would not automatically lose guardianship of her children if she remarries. Instead the matter would be looked into by a judge. Finally the reformers demanded that a divorced wife should be allowed to stay in the house to enable her to truly take care of her children. Lawyers and other volunteers collected 15,000 signatures in favour of these amendments, enough to make the Syrian parliament agree to study the proposal. In the end

²⁹ The Syrian law from 1975, states that a mother can have custody until the boy is nine years old and the girl is eleven years old.

of October 2003 the law on custody was changed, but not by parliament where it had been discussed at length. Instead the Syrian president issued a decree whereby a boy can stay with his mother until he is 13 and a girl until she is 15. According to some legal activist in Syria it is positive that the law has been amended, but it is negative that the new law does not include the right of the mother to a house if she is divorced.

The Presidential Decree underlines the difficulties in reforming Syrian family law. The Alawite minority president was forced to balance skilfully between opposing poles. To the outside world, and to the country's more radical constituency, Syria can claim that laws are being modernized. At the same time the actual changes were not drastic enough to induce the more conservative members of parliament into actions of opposition. The 'secular' president, thus, avoided the risk of facing organized Sunni Muslim protests.

Such protests had brought the country to the brink of civil war in the late 1970s and early 1980s. After the army had crushed the Syrian Muslim brotherhood, the regime started a process of rapprochement with the majority Sunni community in Syria. 'Non-political' religion was supported through buildings of mosques and more liberal views on religious gatherings. Twenty-five years since this crisis, 'family law' has become increasingly important as a symbol of Sunni Muslim numerical dominance, and, as noted above, believed to be the last bastion of sacred law. Similar tendencies can be noted in many other countries in the region.

The development of family law is a complex issue in any country. Syrian law has been partially inherited from an Ottoman past. The *millet* system has survived in Syrian legal

pluralism, whereby boundaries between religious groups are maintained. The Ottoman law was also influenced by Western codes. The codification of family law after independence was patterned on Egyptian law. The ruling party was politically radical in the 1960s and until the 1980s in terms of nationalisation of natural resources, of establishing public enterprises, of creating land reform, of increasing employment and educational opportunities for all citizen. Family law, however, was largely left alone. Today, a top-down push to change family law radically would be met with great resistance, especially from the Sunni Muslims since the regime is perceived to be controlled by minorities, especially by a Shi'a minority. The process to change the law for custody is, however, also an example of how a non-confessional Syrian civil society is trying to regain political influence after nearly thirty years of severe political repression. Perhaps this was just the first step. Thus, in Syria not only the regime (and state) shapes relations between women and men, and between various religious groups but civil society is also important. But this civil society depends on the state being able to act at all. Until today, an analysis of Syrian 'identity politics' - linked to perceptions of ethnicity or religious belonging – cannot be undertaken without an analysis of the role of the Syrian state.

Religious Identity Groups and Cultural Dialogue

Hans Ingvar Roth

The Place of Religion in Cultural Wars and Political Contexts

At the core of cultural wars lies the concept of values. The conflicts that we often refer to when we talk about cultural wars – especially in modern Western contexts – involve clashes between various normative systems and different value judgements. These phenomena can be exemplified by the Veil debate in France, the role of religion in schools, homosexual marriages, the abortion debate, the right to freedom of speech in relation to blasphemy laws and norms of political correctness. In recent times the controversy around Rocco Buttiglione as a candidate for the EU commission is another striking example that religion no longer can be placed in the backseat of European politics. The heated debate surrounding the Italian politician and his conservative, Catholic world view bring into focus how official values in the EU should be characterized, i.e. to what extent and in what form it should be seen as a liberal, secular public culture.

Religion - and more generally life views - has an important role to play when the value judgments in these cultural wars are explained or justified not at least in collective settings. This fact has also become more and more visible in recent years in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 with reference to the conflict between militant Muslim groups and their notion of a holy war (*jihad*) against infidels. The evangelical

Christian doctrines that have influenced the foreign policy of president George W. Bush also stress a dualistic world view with America against the axis of evil (even though it cannot be compared to Al Qaeda's world view and political ideals). President Bush said in his Inaugural Address in January 2001 that his and America's calling was to lead the world in an apocalyptic struggle between forces of good and evil and transform the world according to the values of liberty, democracy and the free market.

Even though the so-called religious conflicts are not new (they should more be seen as a constant in the history of mankind with examples such as the Crusades and the Reformation period in European politics), it is not an exaggeration that these conflicts have gained a new dominance in world politics – especially after the end of the cold war and in the light of globalization. In addition, one could say that religion has gained more prominence in the non-western world such as the old western colonies – for example in the form of Christian Evangelical and Pentecostal movements in South America, Africa and Asia.

What is so Special about Religious Identity Groups?

In modern multicultural societies the significance of identity groups has become more and more widespread. The individualism of traditional liberal philosophies and the socio economic emphasis in socialism and Marxism are no longer the main focal points in important political arenas. Other politically relevant grounds for identification such as ethnicity, culture, language and religion have gained more and more prominence – and to some writers – they have become the real stuff of politics not at

least in an international sense. This is especially clear after the end of the cold war. The conflicts that these identity groups are involved in differ depending upon the character of the values that the groups identify themselves with and with reference to various historical experiences.

In some cases, the conflict boils down to a dramatic zero sum situation – for example – when religious identity groups express contradictory universal religious doctrines or when ethnic/national groups strive to get a complete and exclusive control of a territory. However, in many cases the conflicts between various identity groups are not as dramatic or extreme.

Intermediary solutions are often possible – given more flexible and generous outlooks, such as compromises and syncretism in religious settings and mutual responsibility and legal pluralism in ethnic or national conflicts concerning the control of a specific territory.

However, religious identity groups are special in several respects. First of all religious convictions have often had a specific political importance, in the sense that believers are more or less well organized – especially many of the churches of the great world religions. In several cases such as Lutheran Protestantism in Scandinavia the churches have also had an intimate connection with the state for many centuries.

Secondly, one could also say that several of the religious identity groups within the framework of the World religions officially endorse the same scriptures or dogmas but they differ radically in the interpretation and implementation of these documents. For many centuries before and after the year 1000 Christianity and Islam were at daggers drawn. Many of these internal groups have often been

engaged in fierce battle with one another and the emotional content of the word heretic is a sign of the dramatic character of the conflicts. Several of the identity groups have in many cases tried to solve the conflicts both between and within the religious communities with the help of violence. There is an ambiguity and pluralism in the Holy Scriptures that could explain the differences between various schools of thought – for example – concerning the limits of tolerance and the use of violence in enforcing religious doctrine.

Thirdly, one could say that some religious identity groups bring a special dimension to politics through their allegiance to supernatural authorities and assumed divine revelations. In these cases the members could be less inclined to strive for compromises or revisions. The religious authority is regarded as infallible and all other sources of knowledge are seen as subordinate or secondary. This applies especially to those religious identity groups that could be described as fundamentalist. Fundamentalist groups in all forms of religion show a complex ambivalence to modernity. On the one hand they strive to go back to an authentic or genuine interpretation of the faith and on the other hand they endorse a modern philosophy in the sense that they strive for a systematic religious mindset. Militant Muslim groups have also often taken advantage of globalization and modern communication technology.

Fourthly, religious group identities are often intertwined with other group identities such as national identities or regional identities. Religious pluralism can also occur in contexts of social, economic and political discrimination. This provides an explanation why religious encounters can escalate and become violent. The control over land or holy places such as

Jerusalem gives a specific dimension to the conflict between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East as well as the struggle for political power in a more general sense. The idea of a united Ireland has also been important in explaining the conflicts between Catholics and Ulster Protestants on Northern Ireland. The conflict in Kashmir is another similarly striking example. In cases where religious discrimination is taking place, i.e. when someone is treated unfairly in the main spheres of society on the basis of his/her religious allegiance, relations become a hotbed for complicated religious disagreements. The social, economic and political inequalities provide a ground for an increased motivation to emphasize religious differences.

In summary, even though one should also admit that other identity groups could have the propensity for the four features mentioned above – for example certain ideological movements – it is no exaggeration that religious identity groups have gained a specific political significance in recent years with reference to these characteristics.

The Janus Face of Religions

In the light of the specific characteristics of religious identity groups one can easily see that the stakes are often high in inter- and intra group conflicts. This situation could be misused and an important task is to explain why some religious movements develop in a negative way while some other groups show a more positive development. Compassion, respect for differences, democracy, human rights and empathy are words we connect to religious leaders such as Nathan Söderblom, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and many other prominent activists within religious movements

throughout history. Intolerance, bigotry and violence are on the other hand characteristics of militant religious groups.

Some writers have recently tried to pin down some salient characteristics of what one could call destructive religious movements. Depending upon the perspective – if it is from the perspective of the members or from the perspective of the institution one could cite the following characteristics given by the writers Charles Kimball and Stuart Sim. From the perspective of the members one could mention the belief in absolute truth, a blind allegiance to a powerful leader and a belief in a utopian society and an ideal period. Given this ideal, the members often assume that the end justifies the means implying the acceptance of a so-called holy war. From the perspective of the institution or its leaders one could cite the striving for total control over the lives of the members, a constant struggle against heresy and an intolerant and violent attitude towards non-believers and renegades. These characteristics are often members of one and the same militant religious group and they mutually encourage one another.

The Circumstances of Destructive Religious Thinking

The national circumstances for these kinds of destructive movements can vary, in other words, develop in both non-liberal and non-democratic societies as well as in modern liberal democracies. Militant forms of Islam are well known in societies characterized by strong group (tribal) identities and authoritarian political structures such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt and theocratic states such as Iran. In other words, they flourish in autocratic and theocratic settings where the groups are mirror images of prevailing

political trends. Militant fundamentalist movements have also a special advantage in societies which are characterized by social and economic inequalities and authoritarian, discriminatory political systems. The minor influence of individual human rights, tolerance and a democratic ethos in these kinds of societies make it easy for the leaders of militant movements to find members who are willing to sacrifice themselves for a so-called higher cause.

But one can also find militant forms of religion in ("official") democracies such as India or Israel. In the latter case Gush Emunim (a group that strives to achieve an extension of the boundaries of Israel to a "maximum" depicted in the Hebrew Bible) is a well known example while Hindutva – a common name for militant nationalists Hindu groups - is a striking example in the Indian context.

In modern Western societies militant or authoritarian religious groups are not working on the same scale but one can still find similar phenomenon in various "inward looking" sects or more outgoing and aggressive religious organisations that strive to change society in a more radical manner. Estrangement, injustices and a lack of community, stability and a lack of overall structure or purpose with life are possible general explanations for these kinds of movements both in Western- and non-Western societies.

One can also cite the strict and uncompromising dividing line between state and church (or religion) within the secular state as a contributory explanation in more democratic or more westernized societies. Within some of these states religious minorities experience themselves to be excluded and neglected in the sense that their deepest allegiances are not paid attention to within the public sphere. Hence, from their own

perspective they are the objects of disrespect, neglect and silence. These forms of strict secularism are found in countries such as France and Turkey ("laicity"). The project in these states is to formulate a religious neutrality which completely excludes religion from the public sphere, something that has been explicitly shown in the Veil debate in France in recent years. The national debate concerned first the suspension of three girls from a high school in Creil in 1989 who wanted to wear headscarves in class. The current debate concerns the parliamentary decision 2003 which forbids ostentatious religious symbols in public arenas such as schools. In other modern democracies the dividing line between religion and state has been less strict. An explanation for this phenomenon is the historical standing of the state church system (for example the Church of England). Some countries such as the US presents a more complex picture where the separation is strict in some ways but not in other ways. For example – private religious schools are funded by the state (under certain conditions) but one cannot find theological studies at the state universities. The official political rhetoric (not least the rhetoric from the president) has also been permeated by religious expressions.

The values mentioned – inclusion, community, stability, structure, respect and justice (in various forms) are common values in a liberal political culture and the challenge is to give these concepts a meaningful content and fulfil the values within a liberal-democratic framework. If this is achieved to a wider extent than today, there might be less ground for militant fundamentalist or other destructive churches or movements to have a say or influence.

Preconditions for a fruitful dialogue

I will here mention a few important conditions for a fruitful inter- and intra religious dialogue, exemplified by some ecumenical movements throughout history. In many cases, militant encounters between religious identity groups could be opposed if these conditions are fulfilled. In less dramatic conflicts, which are characterized by neglect and condescending attitudes, the relationships between the religious groups can be improved if these conditions are fulfilled. Improvement means (among several things) in this context an increased empathy, understanding, tolerance, respect and cooperation.

One condition is to strive towards making the social and material conditions for a religious dialogue as good as possible. This implies that economic and social injustices are combated and that shared and meaningful group transcending projects are identified. In many cases religious conflicts are not so much conflicts about beliefs, ideas, norms or symbols. The conflicts are often more about the lack of political influence and social inclusion and the lack of social harmony and necessary material resources,

A second condition is to make the concept of religious encounter more clear or nuanced by making distinctions between religion as dogma (or doctrine), religion as "stories" and religion as practice. In many forms of violent religious encounters the leaders use the religious dogmas (or uncompromizing interpretations) as symbols of power. They legitimate their political standing through their authority in interpreting the religious propositions. At these elite levels or "elite settings" codified statements and clear cut symbols of identity become important and the religious encounters often show here a lack of

flexibility and openness. In the case of narratives/stories or practices, the layman and the so-called ordinary people are more involved. In contrast to the elite level, they show a spontaneous openness and develop new combinations of ideas and norms in the light of their daily encounters with people of faiths other than their own.

Thirdly – one needs to have a clearer grasp of the so-called neutrality doctrine or the separation of state and religion. In many cases, common interpretations of strict separation – such as the laicity doctrine in France – are based on old historical circumstances such as the Religious wars during the Reformation, circumstances that may no longer be relevant to the same degree in the current world - not least with reference to well entrenched norms or human rights principles in influential human rights declarations and conventions. Modern politics in liberal democratic societies could rely upon these well entrenched norms (such as the respect for integrity and freedom of expression) when religious topics, symbols and values are expressed and voiced in the public realm. The risk that religious disagreements in political arenas (and deeper philosophical debates on comprehensive worldviews and ethical doctrines) degenerates in a violent manner is then less probable. A culture of civility is often connected to a well established regime of human rights, a culture that temper the social relationships in a more peaceful manner.

At the same time the notion of religious belief has become highly privatized in the light of liberal individualism. Religion is here to be seen as a private matter and its social, collective and more public dimensions are in this particular world view often neglected. This can explain why the debate concerning the public standing of

religious belief has become more salient in recent years through the increased multicultural immigration. The new citizens have in many cases endorsed more collective and visible religious identities, something that manifests itself through the presence of Islam in the European context.

Ideally speaking, a state in a multicultural liberal democratic society should express certain values such as inclusiveness, representation and stability. It should also be regarded as just or fair in a basic sense from the perspective of the citizens, at least from a long term perspective. In addition, the state should be able to provide important goods that the market or more private enterprises cannot provide to the same extent in an acceptably moral manner. The state should in other words be a focus of identification and not exclude or downgrade the main identities, allegiances and basic needs of the citizens.

Given these objectives certain relationships or activities between the state (or the public sphere) and the churches/the religious organizations come into focus in both directions i.e. from state to church and from church to state. The four relationships are "influence", "collaboration", "support" and "participation". Churches or religious organizations work actively to spread their views (arguments, political visions and concrete policies) on public matters while the state and its institutions implement legislation that is imbued with certain values, values that affect the ethical life of civil society. Depending upon the specific circumstances these activities of influence may differ in a moral sense. (Some activities may be seen as too paternalistic if the state is involved and some may be seen as intolerant or intrusive if the churches are involved.) In some cases the state and religious organizations collaborate in

various questions – the latest striking positive example is the Tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia. Some other examples are more controversial – for example president George W. Bush’s “faith based initiative” which implies that religious organizations should be given federal funding in order to provide social services.

Various forms of support could be uncontroversial in a liberal democratic society if it is done in fair manner. The state can for example fund various private religious schools and the religious organizations could give property that can be used for wider public purposes. The cases that are problematic are the cases when the state gives money or resources to a certain church and not to others similarly situated (i.e.discrimination) and when it uses the support in order to change the direction of the church (i.e.disrespect for integrity).

The last relationship which is here called participation means that the boundaries between church and state become fluid. It is in other words no clear cut distinction between the roles that one and the same person play in the two types of settings. A civil servant is at the same time as he/she works in a state department fulfilling the credo of his or her religious organisation. On the other hand – a civil servant who acts according to prevailing normative standards endorsed in parliament will in this kind of example try to enforce the official values as a member in his or her church. These kinds of activities are the most problematic in the debate on secularism and in connection to the distinction between church and state. One explanation is the differences in purpose and decision making that divides the state from various churches or religious organizations. However, the problematic character of this last form of activity should not throw any doubts

upon the former cases – "influence", "collaboration" and "support" which could be more morally reasonable given the right kind of circumstances.

One can also apply this activity ("participation") to the symbols of the state and the church. If the symbols of the church become more and more public, the presence of them may exclude members from other churches. This has been the case with the Cross and public holidays in several multicultural societies. On the other hand, if the state tries to enforce symbols on churches it may also be interpreted as an intrusion into the private life and the ethos of the religious organization.

In summary - apart from the attempts to fulfil fairer distribution of resources between religious identity groups - making the notion of religion and the concept of the state/church distinction nuanced and precise is very important in making a cross religious dialogue more fruitful in a modern multicultural society.

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Abstract

Collste, Göran (ed.), Possibilities of Religious Pluralism. Linköping Studies in Identity and Pluralism, No 3. Linköping University Electronic Press. Linköping 2005.

ISBN 91-85297-43-7 (print), ISSN 1651-8993 (print), www.ep.liu.se/ea/iap/2005/003/ (WWW), ISSN 1651-9000 (online)

The six essays collected in this volume address from different disciplinary perspectives the implication of religious pluralism for school, work, politics, values and law.

Reevany Bustami analyses the new Malaysian Prime Minister's view on national identity and religious pluralism. Ellisha Nasruddin examines pluralism as manifested in the form of ethnic integration within work organisations. Göran Collste discusses the possibilities of moral and political consensus in nations characterised by religious pluralism. Edgar Almén describes the modern Swedish history of handling pluralism within religious education. Annika Rabo discusses family law and religious pluralism in Syria and, finally, Hans Ingvar Roth focuses on factors contributing to social and political polarisation and on conditions for a fruitful inter- and intra religious dialogue.

