

Nursi's Unity Model and Its Importance in the Context of Racial Unity in Malaysia

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Abstract

Universal peace and prosperity is a humanitarian issue that has found a place in the thoughts of Badiuzzaman Said Nursi. His thoughts, which are pivoted on the al-Qur'an, traverse the boundaries of race and land. This article discusses the thoughts of Nursi that are inclined towards the values that reinforce cooperation between races and strategies that can be utilized in efforts to ensure the success of national integration in Malaysia. This study employed a qualitative approach based on primary and secondary sources through the method of document analysis. This article has found that the efforts need to focus on three main values, which are wasatiyyah (moderation), dialogue and nurturing virtuous values. Besides that, this article suggests a few strategic plans such as forming the Wasatiyyah Institute, consolidating the centre for dialogue on civilization and courses on dialogue skills and nurturing virtuous values through Islamic mass media.

Keywords: universal peace; moderation; dialogue; virtuous values; Nursi;

1. Introduction

A deep introspection on Rasa'il al-Nur would prove Nursi firmly supported the concept of dialogue on civilizations, which places the value of unity as a basis for peace and prosperity. This is evident in the concept of dialogue on civilizations that pivots on universal brotherhood (A. Nefeily, 2009). Undeniably, this brotherhood is closely connected to unity because it is difficult to nurture unity without true brotherhood values (Razak, 2009). In the Malaysian context, national stability and harmony would not be achievable if not for the unity that exists among people who are multi religious, multiracial and multicultural. The importance of unity is in tandem with what was once said by Malaysian former Prime Minister, HE Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi:

Malaysia's success is built on a collective effort. Malaysia will continue to develop with a collective spirit that will not allow a narrow interpretation of a citizen's identity, will not permit the practice of religious extremism, will not condone injustice among its citizens and will not allow the onset of any trepidation due to the threat against the assurance of a future for the citizens. The land and skies of Malaysia is where every Malaysian has set foot on and taken shelter. The land and skies of Malaysia promise a firm footing and bright skies for every Malaysian to live in collaborative unity.

This passage focused on the issue of racial unity in Malaysia based on specific values in the Nursi's unity model that can be applied with the intention of reinforcing harmony and cooperation among races in this country.

2. The Existence of A Multiracial Society in Malaysia: A History

Malaysia's multiracial society comprises three main ethnic groups, namely the Malays, Chinese and the Indians. The Malaysian Constitution states that there are no fewer than 40 ethnic groups in Malaysia and this includes approximately 20 ethnicities each in Sabah and Sarawak. Most of these ethnic groups are categorised based on certain factors such as lifestyle, geographic settlement, vocation and education.

From the religious perspective, Malaysian society practices the Islamic faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Confucianism, Taoism and so on. The existence of these ethnic groups has caused the formation process of a multiracial society in Malaysia considering that there is division based on segmental cleavages such as race, religion, ideology, language and culture. Each ethnic group inherits and abides by customs, lifestyles and beliefs. Therefore, the existence of undivided allegiance to clanship can cause inter-racial conflicts (Ismail, 2005).

Generally, the history of the existence of a multiracial society in Malaysia can be divided into two sections, which are before and after the coming of the Europeans. The existence of a multiracial society occurred since the early centuries because of trading during the time of The Malay Malacca Sultanate. The Malay states then were well known as a region where various civilizations and cultures around the world met. Hence, the Malay States society lived in a naturally pluralistic fashion without any coercion by any party or power. This situation was better known a pluralistic society. The existence of a pluralistic society can be seen from the foreign settlements like the Chinese and Javanese villages and so forth in Malacca. The trading activities had opened avenues for migrants to do business, at the same time interacted with the locals and some eventually married the locals and settled down here (Kim, 2003).

Briefly, the Malay society had from the beginning accepted the pluralistic concept in their life. However, there were no racial conflicts back then because the pluralistic concept was natural and without any coercion. Besides, there was an understanding between the locals, especially the rulers and the migrant groups. This understanding was like between a host and a guest, with each understanding their position, rights and responsibilities.

Next, the pluralistic society's development in Malaysia has close ties with the Western colonisation process and the colonial capitalistic expansion. The episode of the immigrant migration to the Malay States increased with the coming to power of foreign colonials such as the Portuguese (1511), Dutch (1641) and the English (1824). The migration policies introduced by the colonial powers, especially the English, had reshuffled, changed and eradicated some of the characteristics of the pluralistic society in the Malay States. Finally, a pluralistic society was formed under duress and coercion. Due to economic and political goals of the British, Chinese and Indian immigrants were brought into the Malay States in a large scale (Baharuddin, 2011). Hence, this had started the ethnic clashes in Malaysia, which continued from before the Malay states gained independence until today (Sopiee, 1974).

3. Nursi and The Rasa'il al-Nur

Badiuzzaman Said Nursi was a distinguished Islamic figure in Turkey. Nursi lived until he was 83 years old (1877-1960), which was a tragic era in the folds of Islamic history. At that time the Islamic world was witness to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate system and the rise of the Turkish Republic, a country centred on secular ideology.

Nursi himself had divided his life into three levels: the Old (Qadim), the New (Jadid) and the Third (Thalith). This was based on the history of Rasa'il al-Nur's development. The old Said was the era when Rasa'il al-Nur was conceptualised. The Rasa'il al-Nur is a collection of Nursi's works such as *al-Kalimat*, *al-Maktubat*, *al-Lam'at*, *al-Shu'a'at*, *Isharat al-Ijaz fi Mazan al-Ijaz*, *al-Mathnawi al-Arabi al-Nuri*, *al-Malahiq*, *Sayqal al-Islam dan Sirah Dhatiyyah* (al-^cIwadi 1997). The Rasa'il al-Nur produced after this era was formed from knowledge, experience and Nursi's observation on the surroundings, situations and crises that struck. He saw that the best way to help society and the country out of this crises was through the understanding and appreciation of faith (*iman*). For this reason the Rasa'il al-Nur was produced during this second era of Nursi's life, the New Said, which lasted for 25 years. The last era or the Third Said was the era of maturity and success of Rasa'il al-Nur, after it went through numerous tribulations and challenges.

During Nursi's lifetime (83 years), he had witnessed five forms of governments and each one had its own characteristics and differences. Starting with the rule of Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II (1877-1908), followed by the al-Ittihad wa al-Taraqqi Party (1908-1918), The Alliance Occupation (1918-1923), the People's Republic Party (1923-1950) and lastly the rule of the Turkish Democratic Party (1950-1960) (Mohamad, 2003).

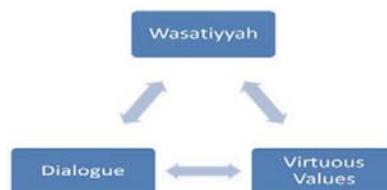
4. The Appropriateness of the thoughts of Nursi in the Malaysian Context

The authors see two main reasons for the appropriateness and relevance of the Nursi ideas that can be applied in this country. First, the pluralistic society surrounding Nursi's life forms a strong basis for his thinking. The Ottoman Empire is famous for its diverse races and ethnic origins sheltering under its power. Moreover, its strategic location between Europe and Asia further substantiates this statement (Freely, 1998). This diversity can be seen in the religions practiced by its society such as Islam (ethnic Turkish, Albanian and Kurdish), Christianity (ethnic Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, Albanian, Vlah, Moldovian, Rutenia, Karama, Croatia, Assyria and Arab Christians) and Judaism (ethnic Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Romaiot and Karaim) (Karpat, 2004). The pluralistic society of the Ottoman Empire was more complex compared to the pluralistic society in Malaysia. Hence, both the Ottoman Empire and Malaysia have a pluralistic society.

Secondly, Nursi who was a reformist (*tajdid*) figure as explained earlier understood the situation and tribulations of the society and country at that time. He understood the significance of the Muslim society as the pillar of the Ottoman Empire that was responsible in upholding the nobility and sacredness of Islam. Hence, he was aware of the fact regarding the importance and rights that need to be given to the non-Muslim community. Thus, the Rasa'il al-Nur advocated by him, not only represents the Islamic community but rather the whole society of the Ottoman Empire. Nursi was of the opinion that, without accommodating both the Muslims and non-Muslims, efforts to develop the strength of a nation cannot be achieved. Hence, his thoughts emphasized the *wasatiyyah* aspect, which could become the link among the diverse Ottoman community. The element of *wasatiyyah* is conducive to the culture and attitudes of the Malaysian community, especially the Malays (Husin, 2011).

5. Nursi's Unity Model

Nursi's unity model is as follows:



6. Wasatiyyah (Moderation or A Balanced Median)

Wasatiyyah is the main principle in Nursi's unity model because this principle is also the pillar to the education method that he propagated (al-Badrani, 2000). *Wasatiyyah* is backed by two supporting principles, which are dialogue and assimilation of virtuous values. Although *wasatiyyah* is the main pillar, the supporting principles are equally important because the three principles complement each other. Close and detail examinations prove that the characteristics of *wasatiyyah* are in the thoughts of Nursi. He said that, "there is no wisdom in *ifrat* (too much) and *tafrit* (too little) in all matters" (al-Nursi, 1999a).

In numerous researches and writings, *wasatiyyah* is found to have a few meanings. Among them is moderation and balance. Both these characteristics of *wasatiyyah* have become the pillar of Nursi thinking:

- a. Balance: balance requires an emphasis on impartiality and fairness on two issues. This interpretation can be seen in the thoughts of Nursi who emphasised the importance of religion and science to build a perfect life (al-Nursi, 1999a). Islam is considered as 'a way of life' that adheres to the characteristics of balance and emphasises the importance of earth and the after-life (al-Nursi, 1999b). In addition, the assimilation of the *tasawuf* and *shari'ah* values in everyday life should occur in tandem. Nursi rejected the practice of *tasawuf* that neglects *shari'ah* and vice-versa (al-Nursi, 1992).
- b. Moderation: Nursi emphasised on moderation in actions so that it culminates in desirable consequences and could be initiated as an *istiqamah* (steadfastness). The efforts of *islah*, pioneered by Nursi, prove that although *islah* is done in moderation, it takes a long time but the outcome is perpetual and harmonious. More importantly, it does not invite disorder or instability. The Nursi approach is akin to a Malay saying, "pulling hair from the flour; you get the hair out and the flour is not scattered". Revolutions, armed resistance or any kind of hard-core approach that can be prejudicial to public safety is a kind of instrument of *islah* that was rejected by him. The Nursi moderation approach emphasizes on *islah* through education and continuous dialogue and is among the factors that had rekindled the rise of Islam in Turkey lately. So too was Nursi's evaluation on Western civilization, which highlights his moderation by dividing the West into two, namely positive and negative. The positive elements should be accepted and the negative should be rejected. A moderate view should have a good effect in forming meaningful friendship. This can be seen during the intellectual discourse on Nursi, which received a good response among the Islamic society and the West.

7. Dialogue

Dialogue is the instrument that helps the *wasatiyyah* principle to succeed. Good intentions by way of the *wasatiyyah* principle should take the proper path in order to achieve its intentions. It conforms to the Islamic method, which goes by the saying, "the intentions do not make *halal* the means". According to Nursi, dialogue is a platform for interaction, which is a priority for a society with high-civilised values, i.e. a society with a first class mind, as what has been lauded by the nation's leaders. Nursi rejected the instrument of violence in observing *islah* because it does not conform to the method mentioned earlier. Islam teaches its followers to give preference to gentle instruments when proselytising.

Dialogue is an instrument to reinforce kinship. Nursi explained this truth by saying, "modern man can only bow to convincing arguments". Nursi implemented this method through continuous explanations and illustrations in the *Madrasah al-Zahra'* and also to champion the implementation of Islamic *shari'ah* after the proclamation of *Mashrutiyyah* and after the British had left Istanbul. The dialogue platform is the best instrument for facilitating the meeting between thinking and consolidating kinship relations. Besides, it can avoid enmity and altercations. Nursi sees dialogue as a place where the good and truth would be supported with cooperation. Inherent disadvantages and ignorance can be avoided totally, until all parties are in peace and harmony (Mohamad, 2013).

8. Reinforcing Virtuous Values

Reinforcing virtuous values means efforts to build unity based on the principle "enjoining good and forbidding evil". What is meant by "enjoining good" is actually to appreciate good morals and "forbidding evil" is to discard bad morals. In *al-Maktubat*, Nursi initiated unity among Muslims and non-Muslims based on appreciation of noble morals. Nursi visualised an Islamic community with noble morals as a "*mu'min Muslim*". The non-Muslim community with noble morals was termed "*Muslims without a religion*" (*Muslim bila al-din*). The point of consensus between a '*mu'min Muslim*' and a '*Muslim without religion*' is when morals are appreciated. There is truth in this principle because Islam and all other religions extol good morals. Although differences exist regarding good and bad morals, rather philosophically and conceptually from the perspective of various religions, hence, generally all religions bear importance to the appreciation of good morals and encourage its followers to propagate goodness to all.

This situation expounds that noble values or universal values need to be a catalyst towards the efforts of forming goodwill and cooperation. These values are capable of strengthening goodwill among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. Nursi understood the reality in the differences of beliefs, which is *sunnatullah* and cannot be an excuse for not exercising goodwill and bringing mutual benefit to all parties. Hence, based on Nursi's thinking, the instrument of dialogue should have the intention of reinforcing virtuous values.

9. Suggestions

Following are several suggestions on the application of Nursi's way of thinking in consolidating racial unity in Malaysia:

9.1 *Establishing the Wasatiyyah Institute*

In principle, the establishing of the Wasatiyyah Institute, under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Department, and the projection of the Wasatiyyah principle by the government, are in line with the Wasatiyyah principle emphasised in the Nursi's way of thinking. This shows that the government has clearly understood the significance of the Wasatiyyah principle in reference to the socio-cultural reality of this country. In short, the Wasatiyyah principle is the basis for the 1Malaysia concept and this concept is the government's formula in ensuring the nation's aspiration, which is the achievement of Vision 2020 (Anon, 2012a).

Therefore, in order to consolidate this institution, a web of strategic cooperation has to be formed with corresponding institutions from other countries so that knowledge and experience can be shared alike. This strategic cooperation needs to be extended to internationally famous scholars who possess a moderate view as a reference. Al-Qaradawi (Anon, 2012b) and John L. Esposito (Anon, 2012c) are two outstanding scholars who fall in this category. This matter is also seen in tandem with the government's intention to nurture the people towards loving a moderate and balanced lifestyle by guiding and assisting them through expert advice from world-renowned scholars with a moderate stance. The existence of the "Wasatiyyah Chair" in University of Malaya is evidence of the government's effort in building a knowledge-sharing platform for experts among local and foreign scholars; and to ascertain the realization of these ideas by its implementation in the context of forging a harmonious inter-racial relationship in this country. This implementation is rather important so that the ideas associated with Wasatiyyah are applied in the form of practical actions and not just purely a conceptual thought (Anon, 2012d).

9.2 *Consolidating the Study on Civilisational Dialogue*

The study on civilisational dialogue needs to be well established by creating a strategic web between the institute of civilisational dialogue and the high education institutions (HEI) locally and abroad through various programs and activities at the national and global level. Activities by the academic staff and students such as student and staff exchange programs, joint research between the institute of civilisational dialogue and other departments or its equivalent in local and overseas universities would inevitably leave a huge impact on the future of civilisational dialogue programs. Hence, programs like this need enormous fund. This is where the involvement of the government through the Internal Affairs Ministry, non-governmental organisations, agencies or international bodies such as the OIC, UNESCO and others is needed to successfully implement the efforts of civilisational dialogue programs in HEIs. Again, the central institutes initiate the role of seeking funds.

9.3 *Offering Courses in Dialogue Skills*

Courses like this can start from the secondary school level. Among the elements that should be incorporated in the course are ethics/protocols in addressing differences in opinions. The history related to the emergence of the various sects in Islam and how Islamic scholars practiced these ethics can be adduced to the students. The exposure to the culture of dialogue such as that practiced in the West could also be introduced to the students. Besides that, basic skills in dialogue also need to be incorporated in the course materials. There are at least three important basic skills, delivery skills, listening skills and analysing skills (al-Shuway'ir & al-Saqhan, 2010). The authors feel that this course has great benefit to the national educational development if it is scrutinised and discussed in a serious manner at the top management level. This idea would at the very least meet the demand of the Education Ministry in improving the national education system towards creating educated citizens who possess knowledge of the finest quality. In relation to this, a dialogue competition needs to be held at all education levels. Appropriately, the dialogue competition should exist just as the debating competition, which is accepted at the local and international level.

9.4 *Appreciating the "Leadership by Example" Concept*

The country's leadership, especially the Ministers, should pose a good example to the citizens by appreciating and portraying the assimilation of virtuous values in their life. Leaders who are involved in social problems, frugality,

corruption, abuse of power, cronyism etc. are the actual agents who disrupt the assimilation of virtuous values being lauded by the government. Issues such as these send a message to the people that the government is not fully committed in propagating these virtuous values. In other words, "practice what you preach". Hence, if those who are involved in formulating the policies of the government do not appreciate and propagate these policies, then it would be counterproductive to expect the public to practice them. In short, the people are always evaluating the actions and behaviour of national leaders. Therefore, the slogan "leadership by example" has to be proven by the leadership.

10. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, undeniably the allure of Nursi's thinking, which is fundamental and futuristic in nature, has been put together by Nursi by taking into consideration the significance and reality of the current situation. This allows the view that considers him to be a "global humanitarian figure". Malaysia and other multiethnic countries should pay more attention to the Nursi's way of thinking.

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