

THE ROLES OF RELIGION IN THE GLOBALIZED ASIA

Unity for Harmonious Cooperation

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Introduction

Our world is currently experiencing an unprecedented speed of change in almost all aspects of life in almost all corners of the globe. Globalization has promoted advancement of human's civilization, especially in its material aspect. Due to the information technology revolution in the last a few decades people in different countries can easily communicate between each other in different time and space dimension. The wave of globalization has created the globalized world and the global society.

We are now living in a fundamentally interconnected world, integrated by complex pattern of global-supply-chain of trading goods and services –which are increasingly interdependent, yet paved the way for certain countries and regions to develop more than the others.

Center of world economic gravity is now moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific basin. It is remarkable that Asia, particularly East Asia, is showing significant economic development and progress. The emergence of East Asia with the rise of China and India, two biggest countries in the world, is now observable. East Asia is now the only region that can challenge the economic domination of the Western countries. Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, for example, are still showing their high economic growth. China and India are expected to become the second and the third biggest economy of the world in the near future.

As the cradle of major world religions and great civilization Asia's development is indeed a reawakening or resurgence of civilization. Thus it is pertinent to raise a question on whether this resurgence is stemmed from a religious drive or not, and can religion play a role in preventing the negative impacts of that development and, at the same time, encouraging that development to the right path.

Religion's Significance

There are a number of reasons why religion continues to attract people. First of all, it has something to do with nature of human being. In Islam, religion is a *fitra* or a natural

disposition (in a more universal sense). As human consists of physical and spiritual elements, they continue to feel attached to a certain faith tradition from which they may fulfill their needs (either named mental, psychological, moral or spiritual). Some scientists argue for a God spot or a God module existing in every human being.

On the other hand, materialism has failed to offer happiness to man and even lead them to spiritual-emptiness and meaningless life. In a materialism-influenced world setting, some societies have to always struggle with their economic crises while others are unable to find happiness and meaningful life in their luxuries. The pursuit of wealth does not lead to happiness, and might yet make people unhappy, even when they are successful according to materialistic parameters. Faith traditions, on the other hand, offer people a more lasting sense of hope as well as a more balanced, meaningful life. People turn to faith as they are more certain with its importance to their life.

In addition, there have been more and more findings – by scientists or others – on the advantages or functionality of religious beliefs and religious practices for physical health, greater intellectuality, positive mentality and social solidarity. In relation to health for instance, there have been many studies during the last few decades which find an established link between spirituality, religion and physical well-being. Religious beliefs and practices are believed to have a positive impact on individual's recovery from acute illness and surgery, and help prevent a number of diseases. Moreover, some scientists continue to draw inspiration from religious texts and reveal the compatibility of science and religious teachings.

At socio-political level, there have been more and more examples of how religion is used to raise awareness to fight against authoritarianism, dictatorship, injustice and oppression – in any form. There have been many efforts – by religious scholars/leaders and others including feminists – to provide liberation interpretation of religion. While liberation theology has traditionally associated with Christianity in Latin American context, there are liberation theologies in every major religion and in various places. These liberation approaches to religion have led to vigorous activism on behalf of the oppressed – the poor, the disadvantaged, the marginalized – which much involves the study of sacred texts and spiritual practice.

Also, it has been increasingly acknowledged that in many conflicts associated with religion, external factors (such as political and economic interests) play a much more decisive role rather than religion itself. Due its effective power, religion is often exploited to incite or preserve conflicts for hidden political and economic agenda. Moreover, people tends to focus on conflicts “between religions”, while there have been many conflicts, killings, massacres “within the same faith” throughout history. In most major religions, many more people are killed by co-religionists than are killed by people from different religions. Most conflicts are in fact about land, power and resources. In most cases, religion can bolster, but does not originate the conflict. In addition, one should also remember that there have been also many examples of how religion is used to transform conflicts and even address terrorism. Religion itself can help any attempt to forge peace.

Furthermore, there have been efforts to enhance peace among the followers of different religions through interfaith programs and activities. There have been even interfaith dialogues and cooperation intended to address social problems, such as poverty, human

rights abuse, corruption and environmental degradation. Interfaith partnership for the common good has been on the rise in the last decade, involving more and more religious leaders and activists.

Last but not least, religion has also been increasingly involved to help ensure the success of humanitarian and development projects at various levels – from local to international – and in various issues – from dealing with diseases, disasters and environmental damages to dealing with terrorism and post-war recovery. Religion can serve as a source of powerful legitimation required for any humanitarian and development program to work effectively. By involving religious texts, leaders, institutions and organizations, many humanitarian and development programs have achieved greater success. With interfaith communication and cooperation flourishing rapidly, we can be more certain of the potential success of every program involving people who take religion seriously.

On the one hand, this shows the extent to which religion is deeply entrenched in societies, and the potentials religion has to help resolve human contemporary problems. On the other hand, this inspires us the way by which we can live out the meaning of religion as a blessing, a mercy for all people, and the role we can better give to religion in our contemporary life.

In this contemporary era, we can see how people found religion as a meaningful teaching and values that is facilitative in succeeding development agenda. Experience in many Asian and African countries where religion is still strongly institutionalized within societies, achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is strongly supported by faith organizations. Regardless their differences in some aspects of rituals, religions have common mission to create prosperity, security and peace. This universal mission of religions brought people from different faith across the globe to build up a constructive partnership for different field of development and humanitarian actions.

With these all reasons, one can remain optimistic about the role faith can play in our increasingly globalized world. It is up to us whether to choose to present religion as a source of strength for a more meaningful life by which we can truly carry it out, or to choose to abandon its potentials to affect positive changes or exploit it for our selfish interests by which we already destroy it.

Tendencies of the Globalized Asia

The globalized Asia has possible tendencies. Here are some that have relation to religion. Firstly, the globalized Asia will intensify secularization, which in fact has begun earlier through the process of modernization occurred in the region especially since the second part of the twentieth century. This process of secularization has encouraged to some extent anomaly and disorientation of religious values among the believers. The emergence of secular culture has paved the way for hedonistic pop culture and change of life style especially among young people in many countries of East Asia.

Second, globalization that had created the globalized Asia has also encouraged individualism among nations as each nation tends to show its national identity. This individualistic orientation has brought about tension and even conflict over territorial

claim between certain East Asian countries, such as between Japan and China, China and the Philippines, the Philippines and Malaysia, etc. This is excluding the existing conflicts between the two Koreas which has ideological background, and the Mindano's case in Southern Philippines, and the Pattani's case in Southern Thailand, which both include religious nuances.

Third, the globalized Asia has also a tendency on it's relation to religious driving. Though there have been polemics on the role of religion on East Asia's development, many believed that the rise of China, for instance, has something to do with Confucianistic ethical values. Like Protestantism ethics had played roles in the emergence of Western economy, Confucianistic ethical values are also seen in the rise of China's economy and the economy of some countries with "Confucianistic" influence, such as Hongkong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, or Singapore.

Possible Roles of Religion

Religion can play important roles in the globalized Asia, especially in coping with problems may occur and in directing the development to the right path according to religious ideals.

Theoretically, religion has some powers including moral, ethical, and spiritual power. In order to meet the challenges of the globalized Asia, and in encouraging hope to all the people of the region, all religions should joint hand in hand in mainstreaming peace and globalizing of indifferences.

Religions may play roles. Firstly, religions should emphasize their power as an integrative force, that is to bring unity among the people different faiths and cultures. Religionists should take part and even initiative for conflict resolution. Perpetuating conflicts in Eas Asia will only curb a dynamic progress of the region, more over if war or conflict occur between nations in the region, be it religious or non religious in nature. By so doing religious leaders may set up agenda for interfaith dialogue and cooperation both at the elite level and grass root level, and extend dialogue between religious leaders and the government or political leaders.

Our main task is to ensure that religion continue to serve as the basis of peace and coexistence. We continue to work so that religion is not used, misused, or even abused as a source of violence in many forms. As the Holy Qur'an strongly reminds us that "whosoever killed a person without justified reason, is that if he or she killed all human being and humanity" (Chapter 5: 32). When conflicts do occur it is our task to ensure that those conflicts are resolved peacefully, not through the use of violence. We have to believe in the power of dialogue, and interfaith dialogue may take the form of mediation for conflict resolution.

Secondly, religions may play a role in providing the society with its moral or spiritual power. Secularization has created many kinds of immoralities in the society, especially derived from an anthropocentric orientation of human's life. Because of this orientation human being are far from God and are trapped in new kinds of atheism, such as individualism, materialism, and hedonism. As a result, modern society in industrialized

countries are facing social illness. Religion is the best way for therapy and healing to such social illness. By providing moral and spiritual values religion may heal and bring back the people to a normal and healthy life. Religion, in this regard, keeps balance between material and immaterial life.

Thirdly, religion may perform its prophetic mission, that is by providing its ethical values for progress and development. Despite having differences in faith, religions share many commonalities with regard to ethical values. Religions of East Asia can be driving force to stimulate economic growth of the region. To some extent, religions in East Asia have played effective role in bringing about development, such as Confucianism in China, Buddhism in Korea, Shintoism in Japan, Catholicism in the Philippines, or Islam in Indonesia. Though religions, on the one hand, have been victimized by the stream of modernization and secularization, yet on the other hand religions have encouraged development or, at least, prevented that development from being misled and misleading. Therefore, religions have provided moral courage and encouraged East Asia to become the region of growth, progress, and development in the 21st century.

These are the roles of religion in the globalized Asia. Relatively, religions in East Asia remain as a source of spiritual, moral, and ethical values, and become an effective factor to lead the globalized Asia to be progressive, prosperous, and peaceful region based on moral values. It is our hope that religions in East Asia may strengthen the establishment of sustainable development with meaning in the region.

Unity for Harmonious Cooperation

We are now living in multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. No single society that is monolithic. All great cultural and religious traditions have to deal with plurality and diversity of cultures and religions. These pluralities are both given and generation. As mentioned in many verses of the Qur'an, God created mankind into tribes and races with different skin colors and languages. Plurality of religions is also a part of God's Will. Indeed, plurality is observable signs or evidence of God Almighty for intellectuals, knowledgeable persons.

Cultural and religious plurality becomes more complex in line with development and interactions between people from different faiths and cultures. Plurality is resulted from creativity and adaptation of people to cope with realities, changes and challenges. A plausible consequence of these creativity and adaptation is the birth of ideologies across human history. Now, variety of multiculturalism, pluralism and other ideologies have become major studies of modern social sciences especially sociology and anthropology.

What can be done in the future? We have to admit that the world is facing more serious and complex challenges. Not every community, religion and state leaders are happy and supportive to multiculturalism and pluralism. Some of them even stated that multiculturalism and pluralism have been fail. In my view, there is no reason to discard multiculturalism and pluralism. Under above mentioned concepts multiculturalism and pluralism are necessary foundation to find a common ground for our life and our common world. Multiculturalism and pluralism are likely to fail if some of us still think that one particular religion, culture and ethnic is better and superior over other. It has

been fail to create a peaceful world if multiculturalism is directed to unilateral world. Multiculturalism can only be successful if is subjected to respect difference and protect identity of all people.

Second, having this view, then people of faith should find ways to build harmony and prosperity. This is possible through a more productive and constructive dialogue to see differences and commonalities of religions. Theologically, there are points when people from different faiths stand in an exclusive state, but there are also points where they share common teaching. Towards differences we have to be tolerant, but to the point of agreement we could develop cooperation.

So far, there are numerous interfaith dialogues. There have been declaration produces from these dialogues. Off course, dialogue is not everything. It is not a panacea that could heal any diseases. Dialogue is just one struggle to find a common ground and shared responsibility. Despites some over-stated criticism on inter-faith, we need to extend dialogue which involves more people from the ground, the grass-root and ordinary people.

But, more importantly, we need to explore ways to move beyond political and theological dialogues. We need to develop cooperation as part of well-grounded dialog. It is cooperation that reflects and represents our common concern to heal the world. Together now, we face a serious climate change and environmental damages. We witness people who suffer of poverty, energy crisis, water crisis, hunger and other human calamities. It is our humanity duty to find ways for a more positive and constructive cooperation on the ground.