

UPGRADING THE FRIDAY SERMON AS AN EDUCATIONAL ELEMENT OF UNITY IN A MULTI-FAITH NATION

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ABSTRACT

The Friday Sermon in Malaysia is prepared by the various departments of religious affairs in each state of Malaysia. The main purpose of the Friday sermons is to educate the general public about values of Islam and its relevance to modern life and nation building. An examination of 100 Friday Sermons was analysed from the JAIS website (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor or Selangor Religious Affairs Department). The sermons were examined from three aspects of unity building; firstly the sermons were scrutinised for any phrases insulting other faiths, secondly the sermons were examined whether it deals with issues of extremism in a significantly serious manner, and thirdly, the sermons were examined whether it contains discussion of shared values with other faiths. Firstly, It was found that the sermons had never contained phrases insulting other faiths. Secondly, it was found that the sermons dealt very little on issues of extremism in and outside of Malaysia. Thirdly, the sermons never contained any discussion of shared values between faiths. The implications of the finding shows that the sermons have been drafted in a way that isolates the Muslim community from caring about other faiths in relation to extremist issues as well as shared values. If this method of writing continues Muslims in such country like Malaysia would fail to appreciate the idea of nation building because they would only care about the development and sustainability of their own faith.

Keywords: Friday Sermon, Unity, Extremism, Islam, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The Friday Sermon is a 1500 year old legacy of Islam left by the Prophet Muhammad himself to help mold the Muslim society to be the best kind of humanity there is. It used to be that each mosque would have their own khatib who is knowledgeable in Islam to write the sermon and preach about good habits, practices and acts in relation to achieving the status of *mukminun* or a high spiritual believer. In the present day, Muslim countries such as Malaysia have evolved a Department of Religious Affairs that would prepare the sermons before hand

and require that the elected khatib read from it. The exceptions are those mosques that are not under the jurisdiction of the department which includes those by the Tabligh, political parties or luminary individuals like the late Dr. Harun Din who passed away recently. The main focus of this essay is to suggest better ways that sermons can be a force of educating Muslims to be larger than their parochial 'Islamic self' which is borne from a traditional mindset of villages and settlements. Malaysia is a nation and a state with half the population having a different belief system than Islam. At the moment, the sermons serve only to educate Muslims in a narrow context which result in an 'isolated mindset' of the worshipers concerning their relationship vis-a-vis the world.

THE FRIDAY SERMON

The Friday sermon is delivered every Friday at mosques throughout the whole world where Muslim resides. Jurists in Islam have agreed that the practice of congregational Friday Prayers is obligatory to every adult Muslim male. Women are not required to attend Friday Prayers and they pray the Dzuhor or afternoon prayers at home. Although Muslims males are encouraged to attend the five daily prayers regularly at the mosque, the rule is relaxed as many have jobs and other commitments. But Friday Prayers are a must and all activities during the one or two hour period of that week must cease. Muslims are allowed to pursue their work living activities after the prayers. Muslims do not have the Saturday Sabbath concept of the Jews where no form of work is allowed or a day of rest like the Christian Sunday. However, some Muslim countries and states in Malaysia declare Friday as a holiday but this has nothing to do with the requirement of Islam.

From the sources of the hadiths and the compilations of sermons by the companions of the Prophet, the Friday Sermon is a speech that has social, political and spiritual content. Friday sermons are used to educate Muslims about values of pious actions like helping the poor and the needy. The sermons are used also to elucidate meanings of historical events like the Hijra or the sacrifice of Abraham. Friday prayers have been used and also at the present time to propagate political stands and issues of the ruling party or of certain political party. The mosque of political parties like Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS) is filled with the party's version of Islamic governance whilst the sermons of the majority of mosques controlled by the ruling party, UMNO, is filled with all the good things that the party has achieved without any criticism on its administration whatsoever. The ruling party also uses the sermon to upgrade the thinking of Malay Muslims in Malaysia on certain modern issues like the importance of doing work diligently, of saving water or wasting electricity and the importance of infant vaccination or the dangers of dengue. On spiritual matters, the sermons would occasionally relate stories and devotions of the Prophet about being close to Allah The Merciful.

THE TEXTUAL SAMPLING FROM THE SELANGOR DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (JAIS)

I have taken the liberty to read 110 sermons produced by the Selangor Department of Religious Affairs from 05/08/2015 to 16/06/2017. I have chosen it because the department is diligent in uploading its sermons onto its excellent website. The federal government also have a similar website and the sermons are read in all federal territories like KL, Putrajaya and Labuan.

The method I have used are as follows: Firstly, I would read all the sermons and tried to identify the following issues:

- A. Whether the sermons had mentioned any race other than Malays or religions other than Islam in a derogatory manner

- B. Whether the sermons had mentioned extremist groups and acts of extremism such as bombings, killings, shouting or speaking about other race or religions in a derogatory way

- C. Whether the sermons have mentioned values of goodness of other faiths similar to those of Islam in order to inculcate understanding and mutual respect.

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

With respect to the first issue of the research, my readings of the sermons have established the fact that the sermons have not mentioned any derogatory remarks concerning any race or religious beliefs. This is a positive and excellent virtue that would preserve religious and racial harmony. Furthermore each sermon ends with a repeated message of reminding Muslims to preserve our racial and religious harmony in the country.

With respect to the second issue, I could only find one sermon dealing with the Islamic State, a known terrorist organisation (IS: Penganas Bertopengkan Islam 27/11/2015). I could also find only three other sermons that mentions IS in passing and the atrocities that was committed. There was no mention of each atrocity such as the Orlando Shooting, the Nice Incident, the Church Bombings or the Nice Lorry Attack in the sermons. Atrocities of this nature are lumped simplistically as acts of extremism by this group in passing but not dealt

with directly. I have checked the dates of some of the incidences and tracked the sermons of the following weeks. The following are the dates of the terrorists incidents:

Orlando Shooting	12/6/16	50 dead
Manchester Arena Bomb	22/5/17	22 dead
Nice Lorry Attack	14/7/16	84 dead
Egypt Church Bombings	9/4/17	44 dead

I have also not found any reference to the Cina-Babi incident of the Red Shirt Rally or the kafir harbi pronouncement of the Mufti Pahang who had called on death to all citizens who opposed the RUU 355 Syariah Ammendment -proposed by PAS.

Cina-Babi Red Shirt Rally	16/9/16
Mufti Pahang Kafir Harbi	22/6/16

6 DALAM NEGERI

Umat Islam bersekongkol dengan DAP haram – Mufti Pahang

DAP tergolong kafir harbi wajar ditentang

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■ KUALA LUMPUR 23 JUN

DAP yang jelas menentang pelaksanaan hukum Islam dan berhasrat untuk menubuhkan sebuah negara sekular tergolong dalam kalangan kafir harbi yang wajib ditentang oleh umat Islam.

Mufti Pahang, Datuk Seri Dr. Abdul Rahman Osman berkata, hukum bagi mana-mana umat Islam yang bekerjasama atau bersekongkol dengan DAP adalah haram serta berdosa besar.

Kata beliau, politik kebencian yang diamalkan oleh DAP jika dijalankan secara berterusan dibimbang boleh menggugat keamanan dan keselamatan negara.

"Kita dapat lihat DAP begitu menentang pelaksanaan hukum hudud dan Rang Undang-undang Persendirian Mahkamah Syariah (Bidang Kuasa Jenayah (Pindaan) 2016. Prinsip mereka jelas menceburi Islam dan berdosa besar bagi umat Islam bekerjasama dengan mereka.

"Rasulullah SAW menggalakan umat Islam untuk berbaik-baik dengan golongan bukan Islam. Namun jika mereka yang mahu menentang Islam, kita wajib memeranginya," kata beliau ketika dihubungi hari ini.

Utusan Malaysia hari ini melaporkan Mursyidul Am Pas, Datuk Dr. Haron Din berkata, bekas Perdana Menteri, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad sanggup mengadakan prinsipnya sendiri apabila bersekongkol dengan DAP yang nyata menjadi musuh Islam.

Kata Haron, tindakan Dr. Mahathir mencabuli prinsip yang dipegangnya selama ini akan mengundang banyak perkara negatif. Sehubungan itu, Abdul Rahman meminta Dr. Mahathir segera meninggalkan DAP dan kembali ke landasan yang benar apatah lagi tindakan beliau menurus kepada usaha untuk menjatuhkan sebuah negara Islam.

"Pas dahulu buat kesilapan dengan bersekongkol dengan DAP sebelum mereka menyedari bahawa parti berkenaan memusuhi Islam. Saya harap Dr. Mahathir perbanyakkan istighfar dan hentikan jalin kerjasama dengan DAP," katanya.



ABDUL RAHMAN OSMAN
Mufti Pahang

Picture 1 Newspaper clipping of Pahang Mufti on the DAP Kafir Harbi issue

Source:

<http://www.utusan.com.my/berita/politik/dap-tergolong-kafir-harbi-wajar-ditentang-1.346464>

With respect to the third issue, there was absolutely none which mentioned the similarities of Islamic values with that of other religions.



Picture 2 Red Shirt Rally in Kuala Lumpur

Source:

https://www.google.com/search?q=gambar+cina+babi+baju+merah&client=firefox-b&tbn=i sch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiKs_fTwM_WAhVJLY8KHd1iAGYQsAQ IJg&biw=1600&bih=791#imgsrc=VHgVj_cp83BErM:

GIVING TIME AND IMPORTANCE TO ADDRESS ATROCITIES COMMITTED BY MUSLIMS

The Friday sermon writers should consider seriously giving time and emphasis every time a heinous act was committed under the name of Islam. Although sermons are prepared before hand, in the age of fast internet, there is no excuse for not dealing with such atrocious acts as killing innocent human beings under the act of religious piety. When the Friday Sermon is silent on this matter, most Muslims would not think twice about it and do not discuss this with their friend and family. In this manner, Muslims can never exercise their *ihsan* attitude of compassion for all if they were not made aware of this incident. Even though the media might report a heinous acts, if the Friday sermons do not make mention of it then there are many negative implications of such a silence. The silence of the Sermons can be interpreted as a kind of indifference about the deaths of non-Muslim which would make the Muslim totally apathetic about the fate of others. From the perspective of the non-Muslim they might be wondering if Muslims subscribe to decent human values or, worse, if the Muslims somehow ‘agree’ silently to these acts of aggression.

Thus, it is imperative that the *khatib* through a well written *khutba* or sermon take time to explain the events and the message of hatred and sin of killing innocent lives as extolled in the Qur’an and the Hadith.

The sermons must also deal with the internal affairs of the country such as the Cina-Babi and Bible Burning Call affairs. There was absolutely no mention of this and the message of silence would make it seem that the official position is of agreement or indifference. Both positions are totally unacceptable if the nation is to forge ahead in the future with more meaningful issues other than the tired rhetoric of Malay-Chinese or Islam-Christian antagonism. The sermons must clearly rebuke those practicing religious and racial slurs or extremist acts of burning churches or desecrating cemeteries perpetrated. The Prophet had never taught such acts of ‘devotion’ to Islam by desecrating properties or shouting racial slurs.

NEED TO REINFORCE SIMILAR VALUES BETWEEN FAITHS

With respect to the third issue, this is where the Friday Sermon could improve the most. In a multi-faith and multi-cultural nation like Malaysia, the people must understand each others’ belief systems and tolerate or celebrate each others’ difference. The primary and secondary as well as the tertiary educational system of this country have failed to deliver this fundamental of character and attribute in the citizenry. With the existence of Islamic religious schools and non-Malay vernacular schools that promises total isolation from one anothers’ belief and culture, this is a recipe or a time bomb to disaster in race and religious management in this country. The Friday Sermon can deal with the similar values of spirituality and social consciousness that exists in all teachings such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Christianity and others. If the force of the Friday sermon can be used then many Muslims would look kinder to other races and religious adherents and we would have a more peaceful country.

The Friday Sermons also never dealt with such actions by civil movements like the Green Planet movement, the Red Cross or the Human Rights Watchers. Although there may some small differences between the attitudes of these organisations with Islam, there are many more good acts and things that can be celebrated together. If Muslims were to share these ideas and thoughts with these many groups, then the stigma of being an isolated religion can be dispelled.

EMPHASIZING MORE ON HUMAN COMPASSION, LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE

I have found that the Friday Sermons deal with three things generally; the acts of rituals, the meaning of Islamic history and the Muslim as a loyal citizen and a productive worker. There is hardly any sermon that deals with compassion for humanity and tolerance of others. In my random sampling of hundreds of religious lectures by Muslim ustazs, the topic would be rituals and history. Again the subject of compassion to all human kind is not a favourite topic. It seems that Muslims have been educated that forms of devotions such as solat, fasting,

performance of haj supersede all concerns and if these forms were perfect, then one can go to heaven. In my understanding of Islam, these acts of devotions must result in the attitude of compassion and tolerance as well as love for all and it is those that would determine one's place in the hereafter.

The Prophet Muhammad has shown much compassion and tolerance in his life. He did not take any action against the Taif people who pelted him with stones. He did not hang or behead any citizen of Mecca when he liberated it at the head of 10,000 strong Muslim. The Meccan leaders and relatives had mistreated him and his family in the most despicable of manners and yet he bore them no vengeance or malice.

In my random listening of many sermons, lectures and speeches by non-Muslim personalities who are Buddhists, Christians, Hindus or Atheists, these people concentrate on the issue of compassion, tolerance and love for all and never mention anything of formalistic rituals as acts of devotions that supersede acts of the heart. The Muslim scholars give speeches, sermons and teachings that are of the opposite content.

CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, Islam is at a crossroad. It will either be accepted as a civilized faith or it will be shunned as a faith that tolerates and encourages atrocities against others. It can be known also as a religion that is self indulgent of its own virtues. It can be known as a religion that rejects all teachings and lessons of human civilization and accept only its own sources of teachings. It will be the most parochial and narrow faith intolerant and non-accepting of all. Unless Muslims are educated by teachings in schools or mosques to be what the Prophet Muhammad wanted, as a mercy to mankind, Islam will not have a bright future. The Friday Sermon is a key educational tool to transform a selfish, intolerant and dispassionate Muslim into a human being that is the light of forgiveness, acceptance and love for all mankind.

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