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Integrating Tawhidic Human Values within a Secular Framework: Implications for Muslim Communities in Southeast Asia

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In our fast-changing world, the challenges we face are multifaceted, demanding a holistic approach that recognizes the importance of ethical, spiritual, and cultural values amid a secular way of life. Every Muslim believer has the responsibility to ensure that their actions are guided by a deep understanding of the

Over the past few decades, concerned Muslim organizations across the Muslim world have provided a blueprint for addressing contemporary issues that emphasize the universal message of Islam as a dynamic force for nation-building and empowerment. While various initiatives have been crafted to chart a path toward realizing the true meaning of empowerment and nation-building, Muslims regardless of their race and ethnicity should embrace the belief that the idea of meaningful coexistence should be profoundly articulated by those who embody justice, compassion, and a deep sense of responsibility—values that Islam and other great civilizations have upheld throughout history. It is, therefore, a significant challenge for all Muslim communities to develop a knowledge culture that builds nations that are not only prosperous but also just, inclusive, and morally grounded.

Given the "non-tawhidic" approach to development or dualism, there is no doubt that the concept of empowerment is often associated with how particular members of a community participate in political, economic, and institutional reform. While active participation in social spheres is an important measure of empowerment, however, a holistic approach to empowerment goes beyond material success and technical advancement.

A holistic view of empowerment, which includes the spiritual, ethical, and cultural dimensions of human life, should be reflected in our knowledge culture. However, due to the dualistic approach to education, many policymakers may question its legality, as it appears to contradict the constitution that upholds the concept of separation of church and state. This phenomenon has been particularly experienced by Muslim minorities in the region, especially Muslim Filipinos.

Moving beyond the discourse of the conventional approach to peaceful co-existence, which captures the essence of social harmony, the promotion of ethical governance, and the creation of an environment where individuals can grow not only as good citizens but also as moral agents, is often obstructed by a knowledge culture that advances a materialistic approach which tends to overlook the more nuanced, qualitative aspects of living

Being aware of the flaws of the conventional approach to coexistence, Muslim scholars in the region have engaged with their counterparts to recontextualize ethical governance, which emphasizes moral values, transparency, and accountability in the public sphere as a strategy to foster a national narrative for integration. Like the neighbouring countries, Muslim organizations like the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, Ranao Council Incorporated, Imam Council of the Philippines, and others have organized workshops and training programs to educate local leaders and community members about ethical governance, encouraging them to adopt practices that align with Islamic principles. Their collaborative efforts with non-governmental organizations in implementing various programs addressing social inequalities, economic disparities, and other issues affecting Muslim communities have contributed to bridging the epistemological clash between the two opposing intellectual traditions.

Additionally, the cultural and identity preservation of Muslim communities in the region has been taken seriously by many advocates of peaceful coexistence to enhance the conventional approach to nation-building. The effort to preserve and promote the rich cultural heritage of Filipino Muslims and other communities in the region, along with recognizing their integration into the broader national narrative, will not only instil a sense of pride and identity among the youth but also encourage them to embrace their heritage while contributing positively to society.

Responding to the challenges of modern education as a state instrument for national integration, Muslim educational leaders find themselves at a critical juncture in positioning Muslim education. They share the view that adopting a holistic approach, such as integrating Islamic principles into the existing curriculum, will strengthen its ability to produce not only good individuals but also responsible citizens. Various government policies have been enacted by responsible leaders to give special attention to fostering the growth of Muslim youth, ensuring they are on par with their non-Muslim peers within the current educational

To ensure that the voices of Muslim communities are heard at the national level, the Islamic language and the philosophical underpinnings for interfaith dialogue should be been carefully articulated by rightful intellectual leaders. Their efforts should aim to build bridges and foster social harmony, addressing misconceptions about Islam, its culture and practices, as well as its role in national integration.

Therefore, to ensure that the voices of Muslim minorities are heard, community leaders must be actively involved in national policymaking processes that reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of Muslim communities. This involvement will transform Muslim communities into relevant players in the realization of a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Given the influence of secular approaches to peaceful coexistence, we have witnessed how community leaders in the region, particularly in the Bangsamoro, have responded to the challenges posed by the dominant discourse on peace education through their unwavering efforts to preserve and revitalize cultural and historical dialogue with their counterparts. We are also aware that much of this dialogue has been interrupted or marginalized by colonialism, conflict, and modernization.

By drawing from Islamic principles of consultation (*shura*), reconciliation (*sulh*), and moderation (*wasatiyyah*), and gradually integrating them within national systems, it is expected that underrepresented voices in peacebuilding efforts, particularly those rooted in Islamic traditions and indigenous practices, will gain recognition for their significance. This initiative will also provide a historical framework for understanding current tensions and conflicts, especially about the struggles for autonomy and recognition of the Moro people.

It is, therefore, the collective responsibility of every well-informed community to reinvent a knowledge culture that fosters awareness of our shared humanity, which underpins the global enterprise of peace and conflict transformation. This notable milestone in the progression of peace and conflict resolution enriches current theories and practices, contributing

We may argue that a creative synthesis between old traditions and new approaches to empowerment and peacebuilding would offer numerous advantages to every community. It is a monumental challenge for us to re-engage intellectuals and policymakers in the realm of sustainable peace and development, backed by genuine philosophical foundations that respect one's history, identity, and future aspirations.

Reflecting on the socio-political realities of Muslim minorities in the region, the narrative for understanding Islam, culture, and tradition is often framed from an assumption that Muslim communities will inevitably clash with non-Muslim majority, a historical analysis that highlights conflict rather than social harmony. However, terms like "Muslim" and "Moro" in the history of Islam in the Philippines represent more than just conflict—they signify the diverse cultural identities of thirteen Muslim minority groups that have enriched the nation. Historically labeled "Moro" by the Spanish, these communities today still grapple with issues of identity and marginalization, especially within a secular national framework.

There is no doubt that Muslim leaders and intellectuals in the region have played a critical role in shaping governance, achieving key milestones such as the recognition of Muslim Personal Law and the establishment of Shari'ah courts as in the case of the Philippines. Education remains central to preserving Muslim identity, with Islamic scholars advocating for a system that respects tradition while addressing the challenges posed by secular influences. The role of community leaders in this endeavour is crucial as they work to reform the educational system and correct historical injustices.

At this present juncture, particularly when Malaysia holds the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2025, we may assume that the path to peace and empowerment lies in the hands of community leaders who are dedicated to bridging divides, fostering understanding, and building a unified, compassionate society.

As we navigate the complexities of our cultural landscape, it is crucial to recognize the critical role of culture in shaping human

of an integrated knowledge culture that can help enhance the framework provided by the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is our moral obligation as a global community to rediscover and promote the universal messages of world religions, including Islam.

In a society that may reflect the prejudices of the past, it is timely to strive to foster an inclusive environment that celebrates our differences. Such initiatives can be derived from the Qur'anic concept of diversity as articulated in the principle of li ta'arafu, which emphasizes the unity of life and acknowledges the diverse nature of our communities. Therefore, Muslim scholars—who are legitimate social scientists and true doctors for the people—must unite to find solutions to address the root of the epistemological clash between two opposing cultures in our contemporary context.

Since the 1970s, Muslim social life in the region has faced increasing disruption due to unresolved social problems such as riots, civil war, and the marginalization of various groups. This disintegration stems from a flawed knowledge culture that undermines social systems and erodes consensus and cultural awareness. When government institutions lose legitimacy, conflicts can threaten social equilibrium.

It is interesting to note that despite the diverse backgrounds of Muslim community leaders, they have shown a unified approach to countering reductionist narratives that diminish cultural identity. This has led to the emergence of both armed and unarmed struggles in the Philippines and Thailand. Both traditional and modern Muslim leaders have presented their views on how to foster the government's strategies for the effective management of cultural diversity through education. Due to the state's adherence to the principle of separation of church and state, the advancement of assimilationist secular education has been adopted as a government measure for peaceful coexistence in the Muslim region.

Sharing the aspirations of community leaders in the majority Muslim communities of the region, Muslim intellectuals in the

interests of modern Muslim communities. The Islamization and integration project has taken root in the Philippine secular education landscape, gradually providing a new meaning to the lives of modernized Muslim communities in the country.

Literature on peace and security highlights the crucial role of Muslim community leaders in addressing longstanding issues of marginalization and cultural misrepresentation, particularly within the educational and legal systems. Despite efforts by policymakers to create a more inclusive knowledge culture, remnants of ethnocentric and secular approaches continue to alienate the Muslim minority. The content of educational curricula and the unamended Code of Muslim Personal Laws in the Philippines, established in 1977 (Presidential Decree No. 1083), which are shaped predominantly by Christian and Manila-centric perspectives, often overlook the intellectual, cultural, and historical richness of Muslim communities in the Philippines.

Given the intellectual interactions between Muslim scholars in the region and across the broader Muslim world, we have witnessed a new dimension of peace and security leveraging the higher objectives of Islamic law (Maqasid al-Shariah), which aim to preserve key human interests: religion (deen), life (nafs), intellect ('aql), lineage (nasl), and wealth (maal). Although the recognition of the importance of these principles remains in its embryonic stage, no doubt applying them can play a pivotal role in achieving sustainable peace and enhancing national security by addressing the root causes of conflict while promoting social justice, development, and harmony.

 It is worth mentioning at this juncture that the active role of Muslim community leaders and intellectuals in positioning Islamic thought and philosophy for the advancement of an Islamic narrative of peaceful coexistence has been evident since the establishment of legal and educational institutions managed by Muslim leaders in the Philippines. In the case of the Philippines, these include the founding of Mindanao State University on September 1, 1961; the creation of the Institute of Islamic Studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman on November 22, 1973; the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) on August 1, 1989; the

2019; and the establishment of the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF), which was set up to replace the now-defunct Office of Muslim Affairs. All these institutions are mandated to preserve and develop the culture, traditions, institutions, and well-being of Muslim Filipinos, in conformity with the country's laws and in consonance with national unity and development.

In the effort to reposition Islamic thought as a leading force in the discourse on multiculturalism, various initiatives have been undertaken by concerned Muslim intellectuals and leaders to integrate spiritual and moral values, foster national consciousness, and promote solidarity and mutual understanding among Filipinos.

Given the intellectual exchange among community leaders in the region, it seems that the unique experience of Malaysians in understanding diversity, interfaith dialogue, social justice, and equality initiatives, political inclusivity, guided democracy, and the cultivation of comprehensive and holistic education and cultural awareness has contributed to enriching the framework of community leaders as they revisit past government approaches to promoting inclusivity and mutual respect among different Muslim communities in the Philippines.

Emphasizing a non-violent approach to armed struggle, community leaders leverage the importance of enhancing social cohesion, interfaith dialogue, and collaboration among religious leaders and intellectuals as instruments to heal the historical and epistemological biases created by religious and intellectual authorities of the past.

Producing citizens who uphold the synergistic derivatives of the principles of national unity, guided by the teachings of their culture and tradition, is the concern of every peace advocate. Drawing from the profound wisdom and universal messages of world religions, including Islam—whose common goal is to protect the rights of all humankind—we have witnessed in recent years the collaborative efforts of the 'Ulama League of the Philippines, Catholic bishops, and various government and non-government organizations, demonstrating their confidence that

advancing their advocacy for intercultural dialogue, rather than allocating a large portion of the government budget to addressing armed conflicts.

In every community, the contributions of its leaders to history, culture, and society at large should be recognized. As such, they should be regarded as respected institutions when they attain the necessary qualifications of leadership, are empowered through formal mechanisms, and gain government confidence in their ideas. Additionally, they possess the moral authority to oppose injustice and facilitate reconciliation.

The participation of Muslim community leaders in enriching the Islamic legal system like the Codification of Muslim Personal Laws despite few legal grievances with their counterparts, and the introduction of various educational reforms have provided pathways for bridging the socio-cultural gap in the history of Islam in the Philippines. Recent initiatives concerning the development of Islamic banking, finance, and the halal industry in a secular state have captured the attention of policymakers, highlighting the relevance of Muslim community leaders and intellectuals in reshaping the country's economic landscape.

As we march toward becoming a well-informed community eager to profoundly understand the complexity of majority-minority issues in ASEAN, which are embedded in the interplay of historical, political, social, and cultural factors, we are confronted by challenges stemming from exclusivist approaches to empowerment and peacebuilding in various forms and degrees. The case of Muslim communities in the Philippines is no exception.

While the majority ethnic or religious groups often wield more political and economic power in the region, it is disheartening to witness how minority communities in ASEAN experience systemic discrimination, lack of representation, and social marginalization. In the case of the Philippines, this marginalization can be attributed to exclusivist socio-political norms imposed by the governing elites, which have historically sidelined Muslim cultural, legal, and educational institutions. This elitist approach, through mechanisms of assimilation and

undermined cultural dialogue and disrupted the peace process in Mindanao, optimism was sparked during President Duterte's administration, which brought renewed attention to national unity.

Being aware of the cumulative consequences of the loss of tawhidic epistemology, which has resulted in the gradual weakening of Muslim communities, we have witnessed over the years how Muslim intellectuals and leaders have leveraged the government's recognition of the right of Muslim communities to choose, assert, and enrich their knowledge culture under the pretext of multiculturalism. Such initiatives have, to some extent, facilitated an understanding of the unresolved crisis and conflict in Mindanao, emanating from the clash between secular and Islamic approaches to nation-building and identity issues.

It is noteworthy that various interfaith and intercultural dialogues have been organized in response to the failure of government mechanisms for national integration and peace initiatives. Anticipating the repercussions of a narrowly defined concept of peace as merely the absence of war—whether between nations, groups, or within a country—instead of addressing the deeper problems of structural violence, human rights violations, exploitation, marginalization, and political exclusion, we have observed a new trend of thinking among young intellectuals and leaders. They seek a harmonious synergy between tawhidic epistemology and modern epistemologies within the context of a secular setting.

In pursuing a discourse of peace and empowerment that upholds the principles of human civilization, which gives merit to sustainable peace rather than its temporary dimensions, it has become a necessary step for Muslim community leaders to advance the meaning of reform (Iṣlāḥ), renewal (tajdīd), and reconstruction (iʾādatu'l-bināʾ) of contemporary knowledge and society, following the worldview of Islamic monotheism (Tawḥīd) and its universal teachings amid a secular approach to peace.

I believe we commonly share the view that, through a meaningful synergy of knowledge cultures that emphasizes the importance of religion, it is anticipated that both Muslim and non-Muslim

Creator-Master-Sustainer, with their fellow countrymen, neighbours, fellow citizens, foreigners, with the natural environment, and with their inner selves.

In the context of our diverse religious and cultural landscape, the revival of the tawhidic approach to peace and empowerment is not just about internal reform; it is about positioning Islamic values as part of a broader ASEAN strategy for peace and empowerment. By bridging the gap between modern epistemologies and Islamic thought, ASEAN communities can move towards a future where peace is not merely the absence of war and conflict but a state of social justice, intellectual growth, and spiritual fulfillment for all.

It has been a real challenge for Muslim community leaders and intellectuals to reformulate an inclusive education system and a comprehensive set of laws to govern the affairs of Muslims within the context of a secular state. The efforts made by Muslim leaders to correct the reductionist views of secularism, which have marginalized the ethical and spiritual dimensions of Muslim public life, are well documented in the history of Muslim minorities in the region. This struggle led to the emergence of revolutionary movements in the 1970s, which resulted in the loss of innocent lives and the confiscation of ancestral Muslim lands.

What we are now witnessing as a transformative experience in the Bangsamoro region is largely due to the successful integration of Islamic thought into education and governance, offering profound solutions to issues like poverty alleviation, social inequality, and inter-religious harmony. History reminds us that Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei have played significant roles in empowering Muslim community leaders and intellectuals in the Philippines.

When secular thought as embraced by the governing state has failed to offer comprehensive solutions to complex problems faced by minority communities, it becomes the concern of well-informed individuals to uproot its causes by confidently calling everyone to revisit key turning points that brought opposing ideas and culture into common terms. This approach has been taken by a few Muslim organizations like the Ulama Council of

perspective of human dignity, freedom of belief, and intellectual empowerment, especially for the youth, to the government-sponsored institutions who are mandated as agents of peace and reform.

However, due to the weakening of Islamic institutions and overconfidence in secular ideas and approaches, an intellectual vacuum has emerged for many members of the community in their quest for identity. As a result, the rise of tribalism, ethnocentrism, and sectarianism among the 13 cultural minorities of Mindanao has led to what is now known as the "crisis in the Muslim mind." Consciously or unconsciously, these communities have become breeding grounds for ideas and practices that favour divisiveness over the promotion of the "unity of knowledge"—a principle that ensures no one is left behind, offering a universal language for meaningful empowerment and reform.

The real challenge for every community leader and intellectual in the region is to identify the core characteristics of Islamic education and knowledge systems that can guide the global community toward its transformative role, as seen during the cultural peaks of Islamic civilization. Certainly, the confidence shown by ASEAN member states in Malaysia's leadership as the 2025 ASEAN chair can be attributed to many factors, one of which is the presence of a knowledge culture that respects plurality and fosters unity within diversity.

Given the depth and width of secularism, particularly its implications for national integration, it would be more strategic for the government, intelligentsia, and policymakers to embrace a justly balanced system that was commonly shared by Muslim communities in the region before colonialism. The real challenge is how to reinvent an alternative culture of knowledge within the context of a secular state that would provide prerogatives for policymakers to accommodate the true meaning of the integration of soul, intellect, and body via education.

The unresolved government policies with inherent flaws due to biases and prejudices against Muslim minorities need to be addressed objectively and with sincerity on the part of the

human nature of which the Shariah perspective is an important dimension; knowledge about the cultural minorities and their development; knowledge of the virtues of their communities, and at the same time their inner weaknesses that can easily be exploited and corrupted by some people for evil purposes. It is important to emphasize that Muslim communities are in perpetual search of development models and thoughts. If they are not provided with comprehensive models and holistic perspectives of life, they will go for a defective role model and a false system of thought. In light of these observations, both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars and policymakers in the region need to embrace a broader understanding of integration that may result in the operation of a justly balanced society in the given time and space.***

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