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# FAITH-BASED EDUCATION IN A MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIRELIGIOUS SOCIETY: THE MALAYSIAN CASE

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The transmission of the culture and values of a community is one of the major roles of education. In fact, this role is so natural and historical that it has been labeled by some as a conservative role because it is argued that in safeguarding traditional cultures and values it hinders the acceptance of new values or the development of culture in some ways. In other words, education is regarded as conservative because it is concerned with maintaining the status quo. Transmitting culture and values from one generation to the next did not pose a great problem in ancient civilizations where a community often was homogeneous, encompassing a particular tribe or race. In those cases, the elders of the community could decide peacefully which aspects of their culture and values were positive and healthy and worthy of transfer. The elders were guardians of the community culture and values.

However, the world has shrunk since the revolution in air travel begun by the Wright brothers and the telecommunication industry in seeking greener pastures and sometimes to escape ideological of religi-

ous persecution. Thus it is a common phenomenon today to find multicultural and multireligious societies throughout the world. The United States, Great Britain, and Malaysia are three countries that have something in common: they originated from a dominant cultural community, but from the early eighteenth century onward they have evolved gradually into multicultural and multireligious nations as a consequence of migration from other parts of the world. This process of multiculturalization is expanding at greater speed as a result of telecommunication and information technology and the development of air travel.

One expects that education within a homogenous community will be less problematic because all members of the community share and appreciate the same culture and values. They find it easier to agree on the culture and values to be handed down through education. However, the converse might be true for a multicultural and multireligious nation. In such a nation there exists diverse groups, ethnicwise and religionwise, that will have different cultures and probably might not cherish the same values. Even if they do, they might not be in the same hierarchical order. The situation will be less complex if the various ethnic groups subscribe to the same faith and if their faith is supreme above their cultural differences. But still it cannot be said that they will be without problems. Hence, in such a multicultural situation, the traditional role of education would not be as easily met as in a homogeneous society. There are bound to be conflicts among the various groups in the community in deciding which cultures and values are to be safeguarded and transmitted. In most situations, the culture and values of the dominant group has persevered and outlived the rest. This is true in countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and Malaysia and is noticeable in their national languages.

Thus, the diversity of culture and values will affect education in the society with respect to the medium of instruction, curriculum content, educational organization, and philosophy. One sensitive issue in all cultures is religious instruction. Unlike a homogeneous society, a multireligious society will encounter problems in including religious education in the curriculum because its citizens subscribe to a variety of religion. In some countries this problem is alleviated by introducing "secular" education in which religion is excluded from the school curriculum. Such is the case in the United States, whose his-

tory reveals that religion was the educational backbone in its formative stage. But owing to the differences between Protestant and Catholic Christian belief, it was decided to keep religion out of the mainstream of education. This approach has its advantages and disadvantages. It has been lauded by some and criticized by others. The main criticism against secular education is the neglect of religious and moral instruction within the four walls of the school. This is felt to have led to individuals who are materialistic and individualistic and have uncaring attitudes. The neglect of religious and moral education is believed to be a major contributing factor to the increase in social problems of the day. However, one cannot blame the school wholly for the moral decadence sweeping the nation, for it is no mere chance that this phenomenon coincides with the breakdown of the family unit which is regarded as the backbone of moral and religious values. Another criticism against secular education is its emphasis on the "supremacy of human reason which treats the human ability to think logically as the best means of finding the truth."<sup>1</sup>

There are ways of overcoming this complication, and this essay will reveal how another multicultural and multireligious country, viz, Malaysia, tackles the issue of religion, morality, and education. Based on the premise that progress ought to occur in an equilibrium--materially, physically, morally, and spiritually-- religion and moral education are not only included but are given priority in the school curriculum without causing disunity and conflict among its diverse citizens.

### **Malaysian Education Under the British**

Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-religious country in Southeast Asia with a population of about 15.8 million people, consisting of the indigenous Bumiputras (literally "son of the soil"), Chinese, and Indians. The Bumiputras comprise 61.4 percent of the population, while 29.9 percent are Chinese, 8.1 percent Indian, and 0.6 percent are from other origins.<sup>2</sup> The Bumiputras consist primarily of Malays, who are almost all Muslims. Although there are a few Indian and Chinese Muslims, in general the Indians are Hindus and the Chinese are Buddhists or followers of Confucius. There also are a few Indian and Chinese Christians. Historically, Peninsular Malaysia has been populated by the indigenous Bumiputras, mainly the Malays. It

was not until the eighteenth century under British rule that Chinese and Indian immigrants were brought into Malaysia for economic reasons. As a consequence, Malaysia became a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. Although Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, the Constitution guarantees that other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony.<sup>3</sup> As a continuation of the British tradition, the Federal Constitution also upholds the autonomy of the state governments in religious matters and Malay customs.

Before the advent of British rule in the eighteenth century, the only form of education was informal Qur'anic and Malay classes for reading the Qur'an (Koran) and reading and writing in Malay. By the early twentieth century there were Islamic religious schools and four types of vernacular schools--English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. The English and Malay vernacular schools were set up by the English government, while the Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools were established privately with curricula drawn from China and India. The Islamic religious schools also were private institutions. These schools, with the exception of the religious schools, were secular. This policy was not coincidental but was deliberate and was stated in the educational policy of the Straits Settlement in the late 1890s.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it was its secular nature that prevented many Malays from attending such schools, to such an extent that the British government had to impose compulsory education. Muslims attending the vernacular schools thus resorted to religious or Qur'anic classes held in the later part of the day.<sup>5</sup> Although religious instruction was not offered in the Malay and English vernacular schools, the Federated Malay States Annual Reports do mention the student moral development as something teachers ought to be concerned about.

### **Malaysian Education After Independence**

This secular educational policy lingered until Malaysian Independent in 1957, when it was decided by the national government to institute Islamic religious instruction in national schools having at least 15 Malay students. There also was provision made for instruction in other religions, but not using public monies.<sup>6</sup> Hence, one can consider this as a beginning of the desecularization of the national schools. Although the policy was formulated in 1956 under the Razak Report, it was not until 1961 with the Rahman Talib Report that

Islamic religious instruction was introduced into the national schools. This lag can be seen as evidence of the insincerity of the government at the time for leadership was in the hands of Malay leaders who probably were secular-oriented, having been educated and groomed by the British colonial masters. The secular nature of the national schools and the lip service paid to Islamic religious instruction became the focus of criticism in the 1970s as social problems such as white collar crime and drug addiction rose in particular among the Malays. In addition, the educational system was criticized for being overly concerned with cognitive development, manifested in an emphasis on public examinations, and for the neglect of the moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, which led to the increase of individuals who were materialistic and selfish.

The turning point towards a moral and faith-based education began in the 1980s as a consequence of the Report of the Cabinet Committee chaired by the then education minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.<sup>7</sup> The report covered all levels of education. A significant issue raised in the report concerned student moral and character development. The report pointed out that the educational system had not paid adequate attention to this matter. It noted, further, that Islamic religious instruction emphasized information that could be tested in public examinations and neglected the practical aspects of faith. In a similar tone, the report acknowledged the failure of the civics curriculum to devote attention to moral development among students. It thus recommended the teaching of moral education to non-Muslim pupils in order for them to be at par with their Muslim counterparts who are taught Islamic education.

The final act that turned Malaysia education toward faith and morals instruction was the formulation of the National Education Philosophy in 1987. This philosophy was formulated only after much deliberation and hearings involving representatives from the various ethnic and religious communities. The formulation of the National Education Philosophy was historic, for up to this point a national philosophy of education never had been stated explicitly by the Ministry of Education. Whatever philosophy of education the nation had followed had been derived from economic plans and political moods. This thus explains the utilitarian bias of Malaysian education. The National Education Philosophy called for a holistic education with the aim of producing a balanced and integrated individual--with re-

spect to intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual development based on a belief and devotion to God. It states that

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the society and the nation at large [emphasis mine].<sup>8</sup>

### **National Education Philosophy and Religion**

One key phrase in the National Education Philosophy is "based on a firm belief in and devotion to God"; its comprehension is crucial. Malaysia comprises several religious groups whose understanding of the concept of God differ.<sup>9</sup> Muslims believe in the Unity of God, Hindus in its plurality, Christians in its Trinity, while Taoists and Buddhists do not believe in a transcendent Supreme Being. In fact, certain segments of Muslims were dissatisfied with the usage of the term "God" and instead would like to have used the term "Allah". One Muslim intellectual contends that although the National Education Philosophy does not contradict the spirit of Islam, it cannot be said to be Islamic because the concepts of servanthip and vicegerency are not explicitly stated.<sup>10</sup> Others argue that in an Islamic school system, the principles of education are based on the doctrine of the Unity of God (Tawhid) which pervades all spheres of Islamic education--its concept of knowledge and the curriculum. However, the national system is ambiguous on this point. It does not elaborate the conception of God that is the foundation of its philosophy.

Clearly, for the benefit of all Malaysians, the phrase "belief in and devotion to God" needs to be interpreted with some latitude. It must not be interpreted narrowly just to refer to the monotheistic God of the Muslims, for this would exclude adherents of other religious beliefs. Moreover, it would be contrary to the spirit of Islam to impose its principles, especially religious principles, upon non-Mu-

slims. In Islam there is no compulsion in religion. The Qur'an states clearly,

Let there be no compulsion in religion;  
Truth stands out clear from Error.  
Whoever rejects evil and believes in God, hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold,  
that never breaks.  
And God heareth and knoweth all things.<sup>11</sup>

A whole short chapter of the Qur'an is devoted to the matter of non-compulsion and tolerance in religion:

Say: O ye that reject Faith!  
I worship not that which ye worship,  
Nor will ye worship that which I worship.  
And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship,  
Nor will ye worship that which I worship.  
To you be your Way, and to me mine.<sup>12</sup>

Hence a general reference to God is the closest the National Education Philosophy can get to Islamic philosophy, bearing in mind the multi-religious and plural nature of the country. To have reached a consensus among the various communities of belief to develop a harmonious nation anchored in a belief in god and to state this intention explicitly in a national education philosophy is an achievement in itself. Muslims should be happy, for the National Education Philosophy definitely is a pinnacle in their efforts to overthrow secularism and acknowledge the faith basis of education. To ensure that the philosophy is appropriate for all Malaysians regardless of beliefs, a broad interpretation of the conception of God as a Supreme Deity which manifests itself differently in different religions may be used to accommodate the various beliefs of all Malaysians.

### **Moral Education and Curriculum**

The National Education Philosophy for the first time makes the development of moral character an explicit preoccupation of the educational enterprise. To say this might appear odd, since education

always has been concerned with values and character development, especially indirectly through the "hidden curriculum," that is, "the unplanned learnings of the school,"<sup>13</sup> or the lessons of history and literature. However, an explicit emphasis on good morals is not redundant, especially when one considers the great emphasis given to intellectual and vocational training and the relative neglect of moral training. This aim of national education also agrees with Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist philosophies of education, which give important consideration to the development of moral character, and it is equally sound for other members of the community who do not profess any faith.

To complement the National Education Philosophy, an integrated curriculum for secondary schools (KBSM) was drawn up and implemented in 1989. There are several major pillars in this curriculum. First, it underscores the importance of lifelong education, which is relevant for a society that seems to regard tertiary education as the apex and the end of education. Second, the curriculum emphasizes the need to upgrade the usage of Malay language across the curriculum in an effort to promote the national language. Third, the curriculum emphasizes the importance of integration among all subject disciplines and between the formal curriculum and co-curriculum. Finally, as we have seen, the curriculum emphasizes the inculcation of moral values. This is supposed to be implemented through increased study of Islamic subjects for Muslims and the newly introduced moral education for non-Muslims. The Ministry, after holding discussion and meetings with leaders and representatives of the various religions, identified 16 universal moral values that are common to all the religions. These 16 values were made the curriculum content for the subject of moral education. Another step taken by the Ministry was the introduction of the idea of values inculcation across the curriculum. This new agenda means that moral and character development will be the concern of all teachers and not just moral education and Islamic education teachers. Teachers of every subject matter are expected to foster good moral values wherever and whenever possible.

## Further Improvements

The theoretical framework of the philosophy and integrated curriculum seems sound. It provides an opportunity for every pupil regardless of religion or race to learn moral virtues and to internalize them through co-curricular activities. It also provides the same opportunity for students who do not profess any religion, although this proportion of the population is small. However, despite this soundness, a few matters could still be improved. The first issue is whether or not the new curriculum will result in the grounding of a secular morality. Considering the fact that moral education classes are conducted in a manner that emphasizes moral reasoning without being based on any religion, although the values are derived generally from religious traditions, there may be a tendency for it to lead ultimately to moral values based on reason alone without guidance from religion. There is a possibility that the role of religion will be minimized or privatized.

A second issue is whether or not the new curriculum will improve students' understanding of their own faith and that of others. The answer is in the negative, since religion is not taught as information or as instruction. The various religions are mentioned only in passing when students learn about their founders and their origins in the primary school history curriculum. Thirdly, will the new curriculum foster understanding among students of various faiths and thereby national unity? Again the answer must be in the negative because these classes do not study the various religions, and, secondly, Malay and non-Malay students are separated during Islamic and moral education classes. In fact, Malays also could benefit from moral education classes because here the exercise of reason in new and different situations is more frequently encountered. This could provide opportunity for them to understand the application of the religious principles.

Despite these shortcomings, the philosophy and curricular design are improvements that should be continued and corrected over time. Some studies have shown that teachers and textbook writers are beginning to pay attention to values inculcation in classrooms and in textbooks.<sup>14</sup> The shortcomings could be overcome in several ways. To realize the National Education Philosophy more fully, students from

other faiths than Islam should be given the opportunity to study their religion in school, and the expense for such education should be provided by the Ministry if an adequate number of parents wants it. History has shown that until today, non-Muslim parents have not taken up the opportunity to provide religious instruction for their children for some reason or another. They may be more conscientious with the help of the Ministry, especially given the rising tide of materialism and individualism brought on by modernity.

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3. See I. A. Sheridan and Harry E. Groves, The Constitution of Malaysia (Singapore: Malayan Law Journal (Pte) Ltd., 1987), Article 3 (1).
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