

The Concept of Divinity in Malay Cosmology

ABDUL LATIF SAMIAN*

ABSTRACT

The Malay World has undergone several formative experiences in interacting with nature, the latest of which is influenced mostly by the Islamic civilization. In tandem with these changes, the view the Malays acquired in engaging with the cosmos is fundamentally shaped by their theological belief. In this paper, the author attempts to elucidate their concept of divinity, which is based on their theology, to the extent that it shapes their views about the cosmos.

Keywords: Divinity; Malay; cosmology; Islamic civilization

MAN AND NATURE

Malay Scholars generally believe that man can contemplate nature because man occupies a particular place in this world. He is at the center of the Universe, the vicegerent of God. He is but the guardian of nature because his purpose of existence in this world is to become an 'integrated, complete man' (al-insan al-kamil). The concept *al-insan al-kamil* reflects all the Divine Names and Qualities, the highest station a man can be, after the fall from the Edenic state (al-insan al-qadim) (Mohd Nor 1982; Iskandar 1966).

Contemplation in Islam from the Quranic point of view is a kind of knowledge that relates the knower to higher modes of being'. The Malay who contemplates reminds himself of his origin and when he reaches the station of 'ihsan', he acts for the sake of God 'without acting' for even though he does not see God, he is convinced that God 'sees' him. He is always conscious of the existence of his Creator, irrespective of time and place. He is convinced that every single aspect of his life, in the final analysis, is motivated and moved by The Divine (al-Qur'an, 8:17).

The act of contemplation is intertwined with action, (amal). Contemplation should precede action because only 'truthful' contemplation can produce knowledge (ma'rifah), which is the mother of righteous action. In this light, there is definitely a close affinity between contemplative knowledge and action. Meditating on nature involves contemplating the intricacies of nature and their divine prototypes. It means making nature an object to study, in such a manner that nature becomes a witness (shahadah) of the Divine Presence. Nature is considered as an 'object' to be studied, in order to achieve a unitive knowledge that can aid man to act upon nature, himself notwithstanding, and to climb the ladder of perfection by using his 'aql. (The term 'aql imply etymologically to something which restrict the Absolute towards creation and which ties man to the Truth, to God himself. 'Aql is the *nous, ratio* (reason), and *intellectus*). It is 'aql that helps man to be on the straight path (sirat al-mustaqim) in seeking knowledge.

The element of transcendence is evident in the Malays' outlook of nature. One of the major postulates subscribed by Malays is that God creates nature; that the Malays envisage from the very beginning the affinity between natural phenomena and their metaphysical cause. God creates nature through the Quranic injunction of 'kun fayakun' (al-Qur'an, 36;82). Nature and its

phenomena is nothing but the manifestation of God's initial creative act that is verbal. But God creative act is also continuous, and God always intervenes. It is a far cry from the Cartesian world view where God stops to intervene after the initial act of creation.

The concept of transcendence nowhere is better expressed than by the Holy Quran. The Holy Quran mentions at least ninety-nine names for The Divine expressing His sovereignty over the World and His Providence.

God's continuous act of creation, however, does not mean that there is no 'glimpse of permanence' in nature, for example, the terrestrial environment has not 'change' in its general features. The moon still sets and rises the same way as it did since time immemorial. The men of today are physiologically the same as the men of yesteryear. The natural form still reproduces themselves with the same pattern. The repetition of the qualitative changes in the process of nature brought forth the appearance of eternity. Moreover, the repetition of particular problem in the history and philosophy of knowledge attest to this element of permanency in nature. The laws of nature (sunnat Allah) which in reality are the laws of God having different degree of fundamentality and universality is possible because of the appearance of permanency in it.

The affinity between nature, the created, and God who is the Creator, points also to the element of sacredness of nature. Therefore, there is an esoteric utility to religion in studying the cosmos and the Malays believe in this aspect. The best Muslim is he who is the most conscious of God (taqwa). All of his activities, therefore, should improve this inner consciousness (Hamka 1987).

THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY

Guided by the Malays' belief that everything is rooted in The Divine, contemplation of nature are facilitated by knowledge through which they can know and internalize the levels of reality and the qualitative aspect of God in the world of quantities.

Above everything else, Malay scholars by and large construed knowledge as a way knowing about this world to the end that man can know more about God and himself (Mohd Nor, 1982). It is both a theoretical and practical activity of solving problems.

Nature can be analyzed and religion plays a critical role in the entire process. In more specific terms, problems and its solutions are circumscribed by religion. From the perspective of contemplation, solving problems result from observing God's handiwork in deciphering nature, with the consequence of knowing more about His mode of existence and as a matter of fact, about Existence Itself. Knowledge is never merely an instrument void of metaphysical significance.

Nature is deciphered in several ways depending upon the field of study; sometimes by means of observation and experiments and also by way of witnesses and transmitters (as in the case of history).

The usefulness and significance of theological knowledge is not confined to problem solving. It increases our knowledge of one important plane of reality- the abstract world which circumscribes the material world. Thus, theology functions as a nexus and an invaluable bridge between the material world and the angelic world and ultimately to The Divine who is the Most Abstract of all.

With regard to the theological conception of nature, it is not only simple but there is also harmony, simplicity and order. Simplicity, however, should not be understood in a vulgar sense. That the world is simple means that man is endowed with the faculty to know the world. And the

fact that the world is created in six days as revealed in the Holy Quran alludes to the orderliness of nature; that from the very beginning there is order in creation.

The external world which is the world of multiplicity appears in all variety of forms. Yet through theology we could find the common factors underlying the multiplicity. There is an underlying theme connecting the world of brute facts. It is not the case that their existence are accidents which are devoid of any higher purposes. Rather, subjecting them to theological scrutiny will reveal that their existence point to an important aspect; that they are manifestations of the eternal and the Actually Infinite.

Theology is likewise an essential tool in deciphering nature and in solving problems as manifested in the phenomena. Man can unravel the abstract aspect of the phenomena and thereafter knows more about himself, nature and The Divine. More than anything else, knowledge provides a valuable linkage unifying the study of phenomena of nature, religion and God. Accordingly, the Malay scholars view the sensible and intelligible as related to God in a manner corresponding to their mode of existence. God is the center for all there is.

In point of fact, it is their notion of The Divine which dominates their conception of knowledge. The total worthiness of knowledge corresponds to the extent that knowledge can bring the scholar closer to God, to the degrees that it can improve his 'taqwa' (Hamka 1987).

They believe that God creates and destroys unceasingly. Yet to know the essence of God is beyond human capability. In like manner, they adhere to the belief that God is both the 'most' and the 'more'. For an example, they would agree to the statement that God is both 'greater' and 'the greatest'. He is the greatest of all and yet He is definitely greater than whatever list of Divine Qualities that they can think of (Al-Attas 1966).

The 17th Century Malay traditional scholar Hamzah al-Fansuri for example, states:

A Hadith of Rasul (SAW) says that, "Whosoever knows himself knows his Lord." (1986:46)

In similar vein, Al-Attas (1970:67-68) argues that:

"... the relationship between God and the Universe is merely metaphorical. Since God alone is the only Reality, how can there be a relationship? But God is not identical with the Universe. We predicate of him transcendence (tanzih) and immanence (tasbih) in respect of the predispositions (shu'un) we attribute to his Being. The Universe is a reflection of the predispositions of His Beings-it is the effects ('athar' of His Creativity (Shu'un)."

MODE OF CONTEMPLATION OF THE COSMOS

In spite of the importance of the external senses, it is the rational soul that can find meanings associated with the results of interpolation. Interpolation are carried out chiefly by the internal senses. Prior to arriving at a particular solution, images are conveyed to the internal senses by the various sense organs. Once processed, meanings are abstracted by the rational soul within the context of consciousness.

Since the Malay traditional scholars realize the significance of the rational soul, it is not surprising that they stress the need to purify the rational soul. They believe that since it is God that imparts meanings to the soul and since God is the Purest, consequently having a 'pure soul' will facilitate the process.

Not all people have the same power of abstraction because of the discrepancy in the 'power' of the rational soul. Different people have different degrees of innate faculties and capacities yet

there is a hierarchy of reality, so to speak. The belief in the existence of Angels, the frequent mentions of God's Divine Qualities and the stated humility of not-knowing the Divine Essence correspond respectively to the levels of reality consisting of the material, subtle and angelic world circumscribed by the world of Divine Qualities and Divine Essence (Siti Chamamah 1982).

As a consequence of their belief in the existence of various planes of reality, we can chart a one to one mapping between the faculties involved in the process of contemplation and the levels of reality. The external senses map into the world of brute facts which is the terrestrial world. The mind and other internal senses are mapped into the so-called intermediate world or the subtle world. Finally, the soul who attains the various meanings and ultimately the spirit, i.e. the fourth dimension, each corresponds to the celestial world and the world of infinity, which is none other than the world which includes Divine Qualities and the Divine Essence.

As a corollary to the one-to-one relationship between man (the microcosm) and the cosmos (macrocosm) we can explain the reason our knowledge functions as a bridge connecting the world of sensible to the world of intelligible; simply because of our primordial ability to comprehend the abstract world (Johns 1955). We brought ourselves yet closer to the world of the infinite and ultimately to the world of Divine Qualities and Divine Essence. The significance of the Divine in Malay cosmology must be treated in a proper perspective. The cosmos is certainly more than quantitative interpolations where signs are processed according to certain formal rules. The definition of the number one is clearly a manifestation of his understanding of Divine Unity.

COSMOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The role of the internal senses, the purification and the involvement of the soul (not to mention Divine Transcendence and Divine Unity) as subscribed by the Malay scholars, for example by Shaykh ar-Raniri dan Syaikh Abdur Rauf Singkel warrant further elaborations (Hamka 1955; Mohd Nor 1982; Johns 1955).

The concept of levels of reality has not received much attention in contemporary popular researches pertaining to metaphysical and epistemological issues. For example, one of the major current assumption is that scientific thinking is an internal process concerning an external world which is void of any extra-mental realities. The Divine Essence and the Divine Qualities bear almost no influence on the process. In short, although the flowering of scientific inquiry begins as early as the first man on earth and that the concept of the existence of levels of reality which is subscribed to scholars of various cultures and from different religious traditions has brought forth tremendous developments of knowledge, popular modern analysis has either overlooked or denied this fundamental aspect. They have either failed or missed the sacred connection between the heaven and the earth and the fact that Divine Immanence and Divine Transcendence is everywhere.

Unlike differences abound, for instance, between the intuitionists and constructivists in contemporary philosophy, it is worthy to re-emphasize that there are interesting similarities between traditional philosophies of knowledge. There is an explanation for this uniformity. In our opinion, their differences are shaped by their basic religious belief and yet there are so much similarities in it.

More importantly, in accord with these metaphysical tenets is the belief that man is a microcosm. He is a reflection of the macrocosm. It is the cognizance of this perennial fact that man is the microcosm, that the heaven and the earth are ontologically related and that The Divine is the Lord of both; become the principle axiom in analyzing the cosmos (Muhibbudin, 2007).

We claim that basically these hierarchy of realities in Malay cosmology can be subsumed under three distinguishable layers (for a lack of a better term). The three layers can be presented geometrically as their concentric circles wherein the most important layer which functions as the kernel of the research program lies not in the innermost but at the outermost layer. We will name the outermost layer 'Layer 1'.

Layer 1 contains the metaphysical principles determining the nature of knowledge produced. These metaphysical principles are not assumptions or axioms or conventionalists' claims. They function as the foundation of knowledge about the cosmos and its overall guiding principle. From our study of Malay scholars, there is a taxonomy of metaphysical principles situated in this so-called Layer 1. The first principle is the concept of Divine Unity, followed by the concept of levels of reality and levels of truth.

Circumscribed and underdetermined by Layer 1, which is the outermost circle, is Layer 2. It consists of assumptions, premises and axioms. Inherent in their conception of cosmology is the position that there are two classes of assumptions; those that deal with the material world and those that deal with the subtle world. For example, their assumption that there is harmony in nature clearly deals more with the material world whereas the existence of angels residing in the realm of imagination concerns more of the subtle world. Likewise, with their assumption of entities such as 'angin' and 'jin'. These assumptions are unlike the principles situated in Layer 1. They definitely are not infallible.

Layer 3 consists of solutions. It is overshadowed by both Layer 1 and Layer 2. The contents of World 3 are more readily subject to change than the contents of Layer 2. These solutions or models results from the application of various methods. In as much as models or solutions in Layer 3 are derivable from Layer 1 and Layer 2, they can be competitors or complementors.

When we say that the contents of Layer 3 are derivable from Layer 2. It entails that Layer 2 serves as the heuristic factor for Layer 3.

In all events, Layer 1 provides the overriding regulative principles for the other Layers. It also reinforces their belief in the incompleteness and uncertainty of our acquired knowledge in the level of sense experience and eventually, the 'external' part of cosmological knowledge.

The three layers operating in Malay Cosmology point to an interesting aspect. Our findings as reflected by the structure of their cosmological analysis also shows that it is theology that provides the foundation of their cosmological knowledge.

At least from the aspect of Divine Unity, theology is central in the Malay Scholars overall conception of cosmology and thus it functions as the dominating factor in Layer 1 and consequently in the other two Layers. All there is has its roots in the Divine. The doctrine of the existence of the levels of reality, the belief in hierarchy of truths, at least with the fundamental knowledge that Absolute Truth is the prerogative of The Divine whose other name is The Truth, the uncertainty of knowledge at the level of sense experience and so forth is, in the first place, not a result of having theological knowledge alone. More important than that, it is a consequence of their deep-rooted belief in the concept of Divinity in their cosmology.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the Malay World has undergone several formative experiences in interacting with nature, the latest of which is influenced mostly by the Islamic civilization. In tandem with these changes, the view the Malays acquired in engaging with the cosmos is fundamentally shaped by their theological belief.

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ABDUL LATIF SAMIAN
Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
43600 Bandar Baru Bangi,
Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: abdlatif@ukm.edu.my