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Taking religion literally

Shamsul Akmar

SOME Malaysian Islamists may have read H.G. Wells' 1903 classic short story *The Truth About Pyecraft*, which tells of a fat man who takes a weight-losing potion.

In the end, *Pyecraft*, loses all his weight, but remains as fat as ever, a phenomenon which leads him floating around like a big balloon.

The inability of *Pyecraft* to understand the finer points of losing weight and fattiness was the source of his trouble.

In Malaysia, the Islamists take the opposite approach.

They comb the details of religious edicts and provisions in search of all the finer points to the extent of making even the most benevolent aspects of Islam rigid and heartless.

An example is the issue of the distribution of zakat (tithe) highlighted by Utusan Malaysia.

The failure to extend funds to orphanages provoked its ire.

A reader of the Malay daily *Azizan Aziz* from Morib had pointed out that orphans and even ibu tunggal (single mothers) were not extended the zakat due to the fact that they were not among the asnaf (recipients as stipulated in the Quran).

The asnaf according to the Islamic tradition include the poor, those earning less than those prescribed to pay the zakat, the destitute, Muslims in debt through pressing circumstances, travellers in need, those serving the cause of Islam and fighting in the way of God, slaves who need to buy out their bondage, for benevolent works and the amil (those collecting the zakat on behalf of the state) whose livelihood derives from it.

Since orphans and ibu tunggal are not specified in the asnaf, zakat funds are not disbursed to them.

Obviously, orphans and ibu tunggal can be included. Many are desperately poor.

The problem arises when puritans argue that the will of God, as reflected in the Quran cannot be interpreted by logic and need to be observed strictly to the letter.

A similar situation arose when the Government imposed a mandatory death sentence for drug trafficking and harsher penalties for drug pushers nearly two decades ago.

The Islamists did not see the need for such severe punishments for drug abusers, and would have preferred meting out punishment to those consuming alcohol.

The justification was that drug abuse is not mentioned in the Quran, but consuming alcohol is.

Logically, drug abuse is the greater sin committed by the Malay Muslim as proven by statistics.

Yet, because it is not stipulated in the Quran, the Islamists took a long time before accepting the stricter laws against drug abuse.

Such literal interpretation applies to the concept of jihad and perceived enemies of the religion.

Blind adherence to Quranic stipulation led the Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (PUM - Malaysian Islamic Association) and its affiliate, the Persatuan Ulama Kedah (PUK - Kedah Islamic Association) to hold a special conference last week and issue some decrees that defied logic.

Among them was the declaration that any support, directly or indirectly,

for the United States military operations in Afghanistan or any other Islamic nation is haram (forbidden).

There was a call for jihad, physically or through material contributions for Afghanistan and other Islamic nations facing such aggression.

Finally, the decree that to boycott all American goods, services and social activities is an obligation of all Malay Muslims.

The first decree not to support US military operations should extend to other nations as well, regardless of whether the populace is Muslim or not.

It should also have added that it was wrong to support any military operations carried out by either the US or any other country, including an Islamic nation.

Calling for a jihad in material form for Afghanistan and other Islamic nations facing military aggression is indeed commendable.

However, jihad in the physical form, especially, in Afghanistan is ridiculous since the holy warriors will probably end up fighting the forces of those from the Northern Alliance who are fellow Muslims.

But the call for a boycott of everything American is probably the most difficult to comprehend as PUM might as well propose a decree to sever all ties with the US.

A bemused Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out how if one were to fulfil PUM's decree, then when one had to perform the pilgrimage, a pillar in the Islamic faith, the Malay Muslim could not reach Mecca as he'd be travelling in a Boeing, an American product!

Later, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stated that PUM was not authorised to issue decrees.

This helped to put things into perspective.

For one, to interpret the teachings of Islam literally is easy when other considerations or rather, the realities surrounding the Malay Muslim community are ignored.

Apart from the US being Malaysia's largest importer of manufactured goods, how can the Malay Muslims ignore the fact that almost every aspect of their lives is linked to the US, directly or otherwise.

Of course, such realities are not palatable especially when the US Government, aware of its near powerful position, choose to be arrogant and use its might to promote American hegemony, values and policies unilaterally.

At the same time, to oppose such might is foolhardy.

Whether the Malay Muslims like it or not, the Islamic brotherhood is not strong enough to stand up to the might of the Americans as yet and much of it is due to their economic dependency and warring sects and factions.

With that, most Muslim nations have been subjected to indignity and their people treated as lesser beings.

Muslim nations have tried to unite under the Organisation of Islamic Conference but it is almost futile.

The OIC, for instance, has singularly failed to deal with the Palestinian/Israel conflict, the issue that was the reason for its founding in 1969.

For that matter, the very act of the PUM and PUK to issue such decrees under the present circumstances represented the problems besieging the Muslim community at large.

The ulama (theologians) from these associations chose to ignore local sensitivities over calls of jihad.

They also chose not to take into consideration what would have been the best stand not only for the Malay Muslims but also the nation as a whole in dealing with the Afghan situation.

What they did was to merely interpret the religion rigidly, ignoring

whether their action would further divide those Malay Muslims who disagreed with the decrees.

The only satisfaction is having said what needed to be said and blissfully ignore the fact they may not be able to justify the decrees, let alone pursue them.

In the end, it is merely a success to be able to interpret the religion according to the book.

But such an achievement may only save the Pyecrafts of the world.