

Non-Muslims in mosques: the Prophet's practice
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I wish to comment on the latest 'incident' of certain Malay group's criticism of the MP Teo Nie Ching's presence in a surau in Kajang. There are certain Malays who are bent on 'racialising' Islam and making what is usually a Malay custom or belief be part of the Islamic tradition. In this case, many Malays believe that non-Muslims should not step foot in the mosque especially in the so called 'sacred' area of the prayer space.

If the non-Muslims were to do so, they must wear elaborate robes and step on carpets over the carpets used for prayers by Muslims. As a scholar in mosque architecture, I have completed a doctoral thesis on this subject matter and have published two books thus far; The Mosque as A Community Development Center by Penerbit UTM and the book Peranan, Kurikulum dan Rekabentuk Masjid Sebagai Pusat Pembangunan Masyarakat also by Penerbit UTM.

From my research, I do not find any strong evidence of the presence of a 'sacred place' specifically meant only for prayers and the idea of defilement has many scholars split in their opinions. What exists in the minds of Muslims nowadays are customs or practices of certain cultures used to the idea that Islam and their ethnic origin are one. I present one strong finding recorded in one of my books and also relate one experience at the Edinburgh Mosque, Scotland:

'There were many deputations that came to the Prophet's Mosque in Madina. Most of these came to swear allegiance and accept Islam to the Prophet. There were also those that came for diplomatic discussions and among them was the deputation of Christians from Najran.

'A deputation from the Christians of Najran came to the apostle. There were sixty riders, fourteen of them from their nobles of whom three were in control of affairs...Mohammad b Jafar told me that when they came to Medina they came into the apostle's mosque as he prayed the afternoon prayer clad in Yamani garments, cloaks and mantles, with the elegance of men of B. al-Harith b. Kab. The prophet's companions who saw them that day said that they never saw their like in any deputation that came afterwards. The time of their prayers having come they stood and prayed in the apostle's mosque, and he said that they were to be left to do so. They prayed towards the East.'

(Quoted from Guillaume's translation of Sirah Ibn Ishaq pg. 270-271 and recorded in the book by Mohamad Tajuddin, The Mosque as a Community Development Center, Penerbit UTM, 1998)

Guillaume, in his translation quoted Ibn Ishaq in narrating that Christians from Najran came to discuss with the Prophet and they left as Christians, not converted. This shows that non-Muslims with good intention are welcomed by the Prophet. I do not know where Malay political and religious personalities get their teachings of Islam from in insinuating all non-Muslims as 'defilement' and therefore cannot enter any mosque.

The only restriction Islam has on the non-Muslim is their presence in the Sacred Precincts of Masjid-al-Haram. That is the only restriction. Masjid-al-Haram is a special Sacred Mosque that no other mosque in the world can claim to be so.

When I was reading my PhD at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, I participated in several outreach programmes at the Great Mosque of Edinburgh. I saw with my own eyes

non-Muslims wearing mini-skirts, shorts and tee-shirts being welcomed into the prayer space and given explanations about Islam. The non-Muslims did not come to be converted or convert but merely to learn about Muslims and their rituals and beliefs. This spirit echoes the spirit of the mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in his early days in Medina.

Our mosques in Malaysia are huge, expensive and monumental but the spirit of tolerance is meager. The Prophet's mosque during his lifetime was small, meager and humble but its spirit of tolerance shone brightly. Presently, I teach all my architecture students how to create friendly and approachable mosques for Muslims to use with their families and non-Muslims to come and interact socially. I do this out of my understanding of the Islamic way of life as shown by the Prophet Muhammad rather than preconceived sanctified ideas Malays have of mosque spaces and architecture.

A PhD thesis by Zafarullah from UiTM Department of Interior Design discovers that there is great variety in the idea of sanctity in mosques by various Malay Muslims of diverse academic backgrounds. Apparently, Malays do not know and agree among themselves about their own religion and mosques.

I feel extremely sad that my fellow Muslims who are Malays would stoop so low to politicising Islam in this manner that puts all Muslims in a bad light. Those who are actually antagonistic towards Islam perhaps feel so when treated in this manner. We have seen so many shameful issues of stepping on a cow's head, of the restriction of the 'Allah' phrase, of making supplication for non-Muslim leaders and the over-sanctification of mosques by the Malays for cheap political agendas that I wonder no more why Islam is being hated with a vengeance.

For the sake of our children and all Muslims in the future, we should stop these efforts of using Islam for economic or political agendas by instigating and flaring up controversial issues such as these. Once again in the annals of Malaysia, Islam is being 'racialised' or 'Melayu-nized' to rally support for private agendas of political leaders with questionable repute.

In this regard, the Malay newspapers have shown a complete lack of professionalism as well as ethical practices that puts the lives of our future generations in jeopardy. Never have I been ashamed to be considered a Malay in times like these.

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