

RSOG Seminar : **“The Meaning and Limits of Tolerance”**

With

Prof. Dr. Wan Mohd Nor bin Wan Daud
Director the Center of Advanced Studies on Islam,
Science and Civilization (CASIS), UTM

When : 28 February 2014
Where : Razak School of Government
Speakers : Prof. Dr. Wan Mohd Nor bin Wan Daud

About The Seminar

Tolerance has always been an essential element in a multicultural and multi-religious society particularly in Malaysia. In these past few years, ethnic and religious tension has risen to the level where the safety and the harmony of the nation seems to be at risk. Many people today question the meaning of tolerance and how much should be tolerated in a multicultural and multi-religious society. At the same time, the balance between the rights of the individuals as well as the community as a whole is fundamental in ensuring that the community is able to live harmoniously, despite their differences. In this talk, Prof. Wan focused on the meaning of tolerance, its historical and philosophical foundations as well as its limits across cultural perspectives.

Summary

Prof. Wan Mohd Nor began the seminar by explaining the reason he chose the topic, which was to answer a very important question asked at a Roundtable held on December 17th 2012, at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Oxford. At the Roundtable, many scholars as well as religious leaders of various faiths discussed the issues pertaining to religion. At the end of the roundtable, a professor of theology asked, “What are the limits of tolerance?” Although this question was a very important one, there was no time remaining to answer it. Hence, Prof. Wan took the opportunity to explore it in this seminar.

He began by stating that the limits to tolerance presupposes differences across cultures and that the reason that there are differences is to acknowledge the reality that nothing that exists is the same, even at the level of the Divine. He gave an example that God has different attributes and that each and every attribute has different meanings on every level.

According to the Muslims' point of view, there are many reasons why differences are important. First of all, it is to allow people know one another. Although knowing and understanding each other is important, that understanding is only horizontal. He stated that differences are also important for vertical understanding, because recognizing differences creates a desire to understand the Divine.

Prof. Wan also stated that there are three motivations of tolerance. The first is to accept the differences which one may not like due to powerlessness. Naturally, this aspect is slightly negative. The second motivation is indifference, which again is another negative motivation. The third motivation of tolerance is humility, not judging others as how one would judge oneself.

He then defined the meaning of tolerance as a coexistence of groups. Families, for instance, must tolerate each other. Although they may be of the same religion, but they may come from different nationalities and thus have different customs and behaviors. Sometimes families break down because there is no tolerance in the family.

Next, he raised the question of whether tolerance has limits. According to the philosophical perspective, every virtue has its limits because that is the true nature of things. As an example, courage stands between cowardice and rashness. If courage goes beyond its upper limit, then it becomes rash. At the same time, there is a lower limit, crossing which, it becomes cowardice, or dayus. Another example given was generosity, where beyond its upper limit is wastefulness and below its lower limit is stinginess.

With regard to the limits of tolerance, Prof. Wan explained that its limits have many levels. In polytheism, people may have many Gods but they also may not be tolerant towards certain things. For instance, in Confucianism, the limit of tolerance is filial piety. Much is tolerated but if one does not uphold this principle then one is not considered as a good individual. Similarly, according to Swami Vivekananda, he stated that if Hindus do not believe in the Vedas, then they are considered unbelievers.

Prof. Wan explained that a direct translation of tolerance does not exist in the Malay language, and toleransi, derived from the English term, is inaccurate in explaining tolerance. Instead, he believes muhibbah should be used as it denotes love and respect. Although a person does not love something, he or she still has the kindness in his or her heart to respect it for the greater good.

The Hindus in Malaysia for example, accept that Muslims slaughter cows during Eid Adha. Similarly, the Muslims accept that Hindus smash coconuts on the ground for religious reasons.

There are many religions that exist which influence everyone to operate from their own religious worldview but they too have their limits. However, today, the limits of tolerance is believed to be limited to causing injustice to others. Prof. Wan quoted Simon Critchley who said the moment any man thinks about anything, he is intolerant towards everyone else to whom he or she differs. This growing popular belief goes against all religious teachings. Modern sciences regard certainty as intolerant and that knowledge is supposed to make people open all possibilities and not be certain about things.

Modern western philosophies are widening the limits of tolerance, mistakenly thinking that being certain makes you intolerant. However, it is important to be humble even though one is certain about something. He explained that according to the Muslims' point of view, there is no compulsion in religion. Humility should be exercised even if we know something for certain. As an example, Muslims believe that there is a Hereafter through Prophets but that certainty does not give them the right to force others to act and believe the same things as they do.

He concluded by reminding the audience that we should be tolerant not because we are powerless or indifferent, but out of love and humility.

Issues Raised:

- 1) One of the fundamental aspects of tolerance is not to hurt other people. A person can criticize on certain issues but it depends on the nature of the problems perceived and the criticisms should be given bravely but wisely. We must know the value systems of those of different views and try to understand where they are coming from.

- 2) Each society must create the fundamental principles that are important to them. If we simply follow others all the time, then there is a possibility that we will lose our identity and integrity

- 3) In order to set the principles of tolerance in a society, there must be a shared belief and values on fundamental elements such as the concept of justice. However, we must be able to agree to a point of consensus.

- 4) Experts in a particular field should determine/ decide the limits of tolerance in that field. The Government should identify who these experts are and consult them. The limits of tolerance should not be allowed to be influenced by popular demand as popular demand changes from time to time.

About The Speaker

From February 2011, Prof. Dr. Wan Mohd Nor has been the founder and director of the Center for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science and Civilization (CASIS), a post graduate center at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. He was also formerly the Deputy Director of the International Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) when it was led by its Founder-Director Tan Sri Prof Naquib Syed al-Attas.

Prof. Dr. Wan has written many books and articles such as, The Concept of Knowledge of Islam: Its Implications for Education in a Developing Country; Penjelasan Budaya Ilmu; and Leadership Competency Model: An Islamic Alternative.

Since 1990, he has been actively involved in special lectures for, and training of senior secondary school teachers and administrators, state directors of education organized by agencies under the Ministry of Higher Education. He was also involved in the training of political and community leaders in programs conducted by the Prime Minister's Department.

Photo Gallery

Contact

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