HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM:
STRENGTHENING OF COMMONALITY AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

Abstract:

Using the Malaysian experience as the backdrop of a modern nation state and a plural society, this paper discussed about the importance of human rights and religious freedom as the way forward. Part of the discussion in this paper is based on the profound wisdom shared in the dialogue between Bryan Wilson of Oxford University, a world authority on the sociology of religion and President of Soka Gakkai International, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda on the topic of Human Values in the Changing World: A Dialogue on the Social Role of Religion.

Introduction: The Malaysian Experience

Malaysia is generally a peaceful country. It projects a positive image for the tourist and a good example (in many ways for a pluralistic country though dominated by the majority Malay Muslims.

However, if we were to examine on a microscopic level, we’ll be able to see pockets of grievances and issues emerging every now and then in the country. Based on a study conducted last year on race relations in the country by the Merdeka Centre (http://www.merdeka.org/), an opinion research firm that conducts opinion research to various organizations, the study reveals that Malaysians believe that inter-racial relations have degenerated over the past five years due to distrust among the different races. The findings of the survey indicated a drop in percentage for the number of Malaysians who felt ethnic relations in the country was “good”. It fell by 12% from 78% in 2006 to 66% in 2011. A significant factor noted in this particular query was the high level of distrust reported by respondents in their fellow Malaysians from the different ethnic background. The findings of the survey showed that beneath the surface, it was a society still driven by distrust which is in part due to communal politics, given way to increased insecurities. Political leaders have retreated into racial and religion silos to drum up support. It was said that the distrust was also due to the intensified discourse in the media on race and religious politics as well as the impact of incidents that have taken place since 2008 which included arson attacks on places of worship, the dispute over the use of the word Allah where the Christians used to refer to their Christian god, the seizure of Malay-language bibles by enforcement officers, the raid by religious authorities on a church accused of proselytising Muslims. The distrust somehow exacerbated after the Umno-owned Utusan Malaysia (the newspaper owned by the ruling party) and Malay rights lobby Perkasa, accused the church and DAP (the opposition party) of trying to turn Malaysia into a Christian state and also other controversial statements made by religious elites. Although these incidences and controversial statements do not represent the views of all the Malay Muslims in the country, these incidences have definitely created hostility, hatred, misunderstanding, frustration and influenced the perceptions of the people to a certain extent. Using the mainstream media and alternative media, a small group of people have blown things out of proportion thus creating a lot of confusion, distrust and ambiguity.