

## MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA: ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The issue of Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia is often in the limelight of the mass media, domestic and foreign. Within recent years, there have been incidents directly related to this topic of discussion. This paper discusses these the issues and challenges faced by the Muslim and Christian communities in Malaysia.

**Methodology:** This is a qualitative study, and the data were collected from library sources such as books, journals, newspapers, periodicals, websites, and detailed interviews with members of the Muslim and Christian faiths. The data was then analysed through a documentary analysis technique.

**Main Findings:** This study found that Muslim-Christian relations often go through ebbs and flows. Generally, incidents involving religious sensitivities are fanned further by the mass media and interested politicians, although these issues are not as serious as reported. These situations then create an uneasy tension between the two communities, thus negatively affecting foster unity in diversity within the plural societies in Malaysia. What should be encouraged as an alternative is dialogue between adherents of different religions for them to know one another, and to promote religious harmony.

**Implications:** In the New Malaysia era, room of dialogue seems to flourish with the inclusive approach of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government. This is a positive development, which hopefully would be a catalyst to building a Malaysia society united in diversity.

**Keywords:** *Tolerance, Religion, Islam, Christian, Malaysia.*

### INTRODUCTION

Muslim-Christian relations has been around for 1,400 years (Troll, 2008). Throughout this period, there have been numerous events that marked the high and low points of this relationship. Within the Malaysian context, both Islam and Christianity have their respective rights guaranteed under Article 3(1) of the Constitution, which states that “Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation.” (Yaacob, 2012).

As is generally known, Malaysia is one of the countries whereby its citizens consist of peoples of various religions, cultures, and ethnicities. However, a number of issues have affected Muslim-Christian relations in this country. Among them are the issue of banning the use of the word “Allah” in the Herald-The Catholic Weekly (Herald) by the Court of Appeal. This issue has attracted both local and international attention, as it has the potential to shape Muslim-Christian relations in the future. There are also other issues related to relations between the two faiths, like the confiscation of Malay-language Bibles by the Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS) on 2 January 2014, as well as the protest by a group of Muslims against the erecting of a cross in a church there. These issues are very important in shaping Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia. These issues have been brought to court for adjudication in order to find a solution.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There have not been a lot of studies on Muslim-Christian relationship, specifically in the Malaysian context. By and large, published writings focus more on the general themes of the plural society in Malaysia, without reference to the relationship between the Muslim and Christian communities. The narrative of Muslim-Christian relationship in Malaysia ranges in the majority-minority or superior-inferior interaction. The majority-minority interaction occurs as the majority of Malaysians are Muslims (61.3%); Christians are the minority (9.2%) (2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia). The superior-inferior interaction relationship is due to Islam being elevated as the religion of the federation, and Christianity is not (Yaacob, 2012).

It should be emphasised here that religious issues in Malaysia is very sensitive. An issue considered unexceptional in other countries might be viewed highly seriously in Malaysia. Throughout Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia, many issues have been interpreted as causing strains between the two communities. The largest and most polemical issue happened in 2009, when the High Court of Malaya allowed the Christian periodical *the Herald Tribune* to use the term “Allah” in their publications. On the government side, the Home Ministry had restricted the periodical for using the term “Allah,” which was seen as touching on Muslim sensitivities in this country. Imagine the strained relations and crisis between adherents of the two faiths. It was quote worrying (Rawa, 2013).

As the Head of the National Unity Committee of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), he took the initial step of starting a dialogue with the church in order to know one another, and produce a more tolerant and loving society, even between those of different faiths. He stated that dialogue is not an easy path. This approach was beyond the pale as politics of race and religion is deeply embedded in this country. Most political leaders use religion and race to gain societal support. He took this approach as he was concerned this sentiment would lead to hatred between Muslims and Christians and a more serious conflict (Rawa, 2013).

In the context of a plural society as Malaysia, a global ethic centred on a universal or “golden rule of life,” is suitable for application. In this maxim contains the principles of key living, condensed into such a simple and short phrase such as “Don’t do unto others what you don’t want done unto you.” In a more positive language, “do unto others what they would have you do unto. This is the golden rule that every community in this country should hold.

As the golden rule of life exists in all religions, the preachers and priests play an important role in spreading this idea to their followers. In Islam, for instance, it is taught that “None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or neighbour what he loves for himself.” Buddhism suggests to do unto the universe how you would like to be done unto you. Hinduism suggests “Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done unto you.” Christianity teaches, “Do unto others what you want them to do to you.” Sikhism teaches, “Do unto others as you expect good to be done to you, and you cannot expect sweet fruits when you plant thorns.” Judaism teaches, “What you dislike, do not do unto your neighbour.” Baha’i holds to the idea of, “And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou choose for thyself.” (Muzaffar, 2005).

Clearly, Malaysians desire a prosperous, safe, peaceful, and harmonious lifestyle. Therefore, one needs a solution to settle this problem in an amicable manner. (Muzaffar (2005) and Rawa (2013) suggest building an understanding among one another, especially Muslims and Christians, through dialogue as both faiths revere dialogue when conducting their daily lives.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses the qualitative method, in which data is collected from library resources such as journals, books, periodicals, magazines, websites, and in-depth interviews among Muslims and Christian men of faith. The interviews are conducted in an unstructured manner, in which researchers and informants are free to exchange and debate their views on the theme of Muslim-Christian relations. This is a good method as they are a more honest, open, and candid discussion. The researcher and informants also have no problem in conducting the interviews in a smooth manner, as the researcher has good relations with the informants. The informants interviewed include the Mufti of Sabah, Sahibussamahah Dato’ Bungsu Aziz (51 years old); Dr. Suid Tapah (60 years old), a UiTM Sabah lecturer who is also a fatwa committee member of the Sabah state government; Pastor Siten @ Rondi Daud (53 years old, Protestant), and Pastor Demianus Robin (45 years old, Protestant). Those interviewed were considered suitably positioned to provide learned opinions on the issue.

## RELATIONS BETWEEN ISLAM AND OTHER FAITHS

Islam and Christianity are the major world religions today (Badron, 2012). Undeniably, inter-faith relations play an important role in human life (Arifianto, 2009; Habib, 2009; Muzaffar, 2005). Inter-faith relations also shape relations between their adherents (Alhabshi and Agil, 1994). Therefore, to bridge the connection between humans, many scholars have suggested in locating points of agreement and respecting individual and societal rights to religious conscience (Pratt, 2009; Troll, 2009; Winarno, 2011).

We can all agree to the necessity of good and positive inter-faith connection. Islam and Christianity (as well as Judaism) agree that there is one God, although there are fundamental differences on the nature of Jesus Christ. What is important, however, is having an attitude of respect for religious freedom, followed by freedom to worship. All these things are inherent in human rights. Therefore, all sides must return to the basics on how to deal with differences. Some acts of Muslim-majority countries that may not be friendly to adherents of other faiths must be criticised and the situation ameliorated. Muslim-majority countries must be tolerant so religious minorities could enjoy a life of harmony and prosperity (Troll, 2008).

## MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA

The history of interaction among the multi-religious communities in this country saw a lot of high and low points, making this topic an interesting study. Lately, the prominent issue involves the interaction between Muslims and Christians. Although Christians only represent 9.2% of the total population in Malaysia, their interaction with the Muslims that represent 61.3% of the population (<https://www.statistics.gov.my/censusatlas/images/ReligionEN.pdf>) is often the focus of attention.

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represent 61.3% of the population (<https://www.statistics.gov.my/censusatlas/images/ReligionEN.pdf>) is often the focus of attention.

In general, harmony between the multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural communities in Malaysia is still maintained, and religion as an issue has never given rise to serious conflict. However, religion is still a factor that could estrange relations between the multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities. In addition, religion is a very sensitive aspect of inter-communal life in Malaysia (Kim, 2001). For this reason, religious issues must be handled with care so as to prevent conflict in a community.

Usually, Muslims in Malaysia will quote the Federal Constitution to justify their actions against the non-Muslims, as has occurred in the three situations aforementioned. In actuality, there are a number of interpretations regarding Islam as the religion of the Federation, with Professor Sheridan and Harry E. Grover stating that Article 3(1) that recognises Islam as the religion for the Federation has no legal consequence and the provision only decides that all ceremonies and rituals must follow Islamic customs. Justice Dato' Hashim Yeop A. Sani emphasises that Article 3(1) clearly states that Islam is the official religion of the state, and any interpretation that creates a conflict between a man-made document (the Constitution) and the revelation of Allah is null and void. It is this diversity in interpretation that forms part of the recent unease between Muslim and Christian communities that may strain relations between the two (Yaacob, 2012).

On Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia, there is also a suggestion for this country to adopt a more open and tolerant approach to non-Muslim presence. Unfortunately, Malaysia is under the influence of the naturally less-tolerant "Islamist politics." This group emphasises a more outward and literal form of adherence, instead of the total essence of Islam. They focus less on an Islamic framework that highlights issues of social justice, forgiveness, tolerance and patience, to create a situation of dialectic relationship between the literal and philosophical aspects in interpreting Quranic verses. This situation then leads to a more superficial interpretation. On the question of religious freedom, some examples show that issues of differences in religion has been handled in a controversial manner, such as the cases of Lina Joy and the Sisters in Islam. The Lina Joy case, which has led to death threats, is against the spirit of Islamic jurisprudence that guarantees right to life, belief, dignity, progeny, and property. The Islamic State must understand the substance of Islam, to ensure justice is upheld and no person is persecuted in matters of religious freedom (AlJunied, 2011).

Administrative-wise, leaders in this country have taken approaches to strengthen Islam as the religion of the Federation while simultaneously respecting the rights of non-Muslims to practise their faiths. Among these approaches include the implementation of a policy of Islamisation in government by Tun Mahathir, followed by the concept of Islam Hadhari during Tun Abdullah's era, and the *wasatiyyah* concept during the Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak era (Nor, 2011). Under the administration of the Pakatan Harapan government in the New Malaysia era, we can see a wider space to build a better relationship between the multi-religious communities. The inclusive approach of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government could potentially bring religious toleration to a better level. Statements by PH leaders, especially YB Dr. Mujahid Yusuf Rawa, who holds the Islamic Affairs portfolio as Minister welcomes both intra-faith and inter-faith dialogues. This is a positive development, and hopefully it could be a catalyst to building a Malaysian society united in diversity. He has repeatedly made statements on his approach to dignify the religion that is a blessing to the worlds, and to reject those that use religion to foment hatred (<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/10/06/mujahid-pushes-for-more-inclusive-islamic-reforms/>). In addition, he also announced a new act called the Race and Religious Hatred Act to preserve religious harmony in this country. Anyone found to insult another race or religion can face legal action.

## ISSUES IN MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA

The big issue that affected Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia was when the Muslims tried to claim exclusivity to the word "Allah". Meanwhile, this is a non-issue in other places such a Middle East and even in neighbouring Indonesia. As soon as the Court of Appeal ruled that the Catholic Church periodical, Herald-The Catholic Weekly (Herald) is prohibited from using the word "Allah" many parties have expressed multiple reactions, either those involved directly or indirectly. This issue has also attracted the attention of the international community. The Prime Minister of Malaysia at the time repeated calls for all sides to accept the ruling to preserve the multi-racial and multi-religious harmony in this country. Aside from the Prime Minister, the Home Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Jamil Khair Baharom also commented on this issue and called on the people to accept the court's decision. Statement after statement have been issued by leaders of all levels, including the fatwa council, NGO leaders, and so on.

Beyond these statements that aim to calm the situation, there were also very extreme and unacceptable voices. For example, the President of the *Pertubuhan Peribumi Perkasa Malaysia* (PERKASA) Datuk Ibrahim Ali stated that the Malay-language Bibles should be banned. His statement was censured by Tan Sri Joseph Pairin Kitingan, the Deputy Chief Minister of Sabah, who suggested that sensitive issues must be discussed by those with expertise and knowledge (*Berita Harian*, 19 October 2013). When one studies this issue in detail, the Christians were not alone. Both the President of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang and the de factor leader of the People's Justice Party (PKR) Datuk Seri Anwar have stated that non-Muslims could use the word "Allah".

This issue has deeply affected Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia, and it has been felt by the international community. Frank La Rue, special representative of the UN on human rights in Malaysia also made an open statement to Malaysia to withdraw the ban of the use of “Allah” by the Herald. He specifically called on the Home Ministry and the government of Malaysia to take the right step immediately to rectify the situation and respect the religious rights of the minority non-Muslims (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2013/11/27/deputy-speaker-rejects-bn-motion-to-condemn-comango/570593>)

According to Prof. Dr. Tariq Ramadhan, the hostility in relations caused by the dispute in the use of the word “Allah” should never have happened and only Muslims with an inferiority complex will try to monopolise the word “Allah.” What should have been monopolised was doing good and not word “Allah. He clearly stated that non-Muslims in Malaysia, such as Hindus, Buddhist, Christians, and atheists often felt marginalised, and this should not have happened.

14 October 2013 was an important date in determining the landscape of Muslim-Christian relations in this country. The decision of the Court of Appeal to prohibit the Herald from using the word “Allah” in their publications have boosted Malaysian Muslim morale. Four months after the incident, on 2 January 2014, a new issue emerged, on the confiscation of Malay-language Bibles by the Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS). Following that issue was the protest against the erecting of a cross in a church in Kampung Medan by some within the Muslim community there (<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/04/19/protest-against-church>)

## DIALOGUE AS SOLUTION

Disputes in religious issues within the Malaysian context could not be untended. It has the dangerous potential of becoming a ticking time bomb or a thorn in the flesh. Such a situation would not be good for the diverse and plural make-up in Malaysia. Such an issue should be discussed in a suitable forum, to clear the fog and misunderstanding. One solution should be a dialogue between the interested parties. In this context, dialogue between Christians and Muslims is needed to foster understanding.

Dialogue, especially on religious issues, should not only be limited to discussion. It should be a new way of thinking, a new way to see, reflect, and understand the world. Generally, when we confront those with a different religion, we are inclined to confront them in two ways, either to subdue them as an enemy, or to learn from them so we could confront them more effectively (Swidler, 2003). In simple terms, we often face those different from us through confrontation or consider them as an enemy to defeat, as we are confident we are on the right path. Lately, we have seen a negative trend on Muslim prejudice towards other religions, as in the case of Kampung Medan on the cross issue. This attitude is unhealthy and should be put to a halt, as it could lead to clashes between the communities.

The Kampung Medan incident signalled to us that more dialogue between Islam and Christianity is necessary. Religious authorities should take the responsibility to publicly participate in dialogue to foster understanding in society. As the majority of the population in this country are Muslims, and Islam has been accorded the position as religion of the Federation, Islamic institutions must take it upon themselves to show have an open and magnanimous attitude and extend friendship to followers of other religions (Mohad, 2015).

Looking at history, the Islamic civilisation played a significant role in bridging Eastern and Western Civilisations. This situation of course contributes to the emergence of a better, peaceful and harmonious human civilisation. Islam as a religion and civilisation recognises the diversity of culture, religion, and way of life. Islam also calls on its people to become the arbiters of peace and the world as a family. The Islamic Civilisation in Andalusia, for instance, is an example of a universal civilisation. It was developed by its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural citizenry. Today, many Western scholars also wished to return to that nostalgic era, which they named the global Andalusian civilisation (Bakar, 1997).

In the latest 14<sup>th</sup> General Election, Malaysians have voted for Pakatan Harapan (PH) to govern the country. At this moment, the new Malaysian leadership has shown a strong commitment to shape a harmonious and mutually respecting society. This commitment has also led to the proposal for a special bill to criminalise insults to religion in this country. According to the Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Datuk Dr Mujahid Yusuf Rawa, this bill is known as the Religious and Racial Hatred Act, the Anti-Discrimination Act, and the Harmony and Reconciliation Commission Act. With this special act, action can be taken on anyone that insults or mocks all religions in this country. Through this inclusive approach, the people have been guaranteed that their rights as Malaysians would be protected regardless of religious, ethnic, and cultural background. Malaysians should see this development as a positive one, to produce a harmonious and cultured society.

However, legal enforcement has not been sufficient to realise the building of a united Malaysian nation. Therefore, dialogue and discourse must be revived so all members of society could know one another, and foster a feeling of respect. In addition, dialogue must also reduce prejudice and distrust against other members of society that differ from them in faith, culture, and way of life.

At an international level, the United Nations (UN) declared 2001 as the Year of Dialogue among Civilisations, to face the challenge of difference of ideas within the global community. As these differences in the various civilisations today are of an intellectual nature, the negative effects of these differences could be mitigated through discourse. The attitude that

views a different group as the enemy, as forwarded by Samuel Huntington in his 'clash of civilisations' is irrelevant (Khatami, 1998). We require a realistic outlook to harmonise the lives of the world community (Sariyan, 2001). The suggestion for dialogue in a global context is timely, when the world community is debating the clash of civilisations as suggested by Samuel Huntington. In the Malaysian context, dialogue is very relevant, as the people in this country is informed by the multiple civilisations and religions they inherited until this day (Mohad, 2009). Nevertheless, dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Malaysia is still not a norm in our society, and there are still those who view this dialogue with suspicion.

Information from the interviews share similarities with the opinions of a number of figures that emphasises dialogue as a solution to interfaith issues. It is undeniable that dialogue is the necessary path to take to resolve tensions, especially between Muslims and Christians in this country. However, some politicians prefer to take advantage by playing with religious issues for political survival. This they practise openly without considering the effects of their actions. Therefore, we can also say that a part of the problem of strained relations between the faithful are caused by politicians. In addition to politicians, community leaders should also play an active role as peacemakers among the community.

According to Bungsu Aziz, dialogues should operate within a set framework, as not all topics are up for debate. For instance, matters pertaining to Islamic creed (*akidah*) are fixed and not up for discussion, but matters of daily life could be discussed. He also agrees that law enforcement could not ensure peace and stability, but it plays a significant role in maintaining stability in society.

On legal matters, Suwaid Tapah shares the same view, in which he states that existing laws succeed as social control among society. In matters of religious proselytism, existing laws prohibit Christianity from being proselytised to Muslims. This is assurance to Muslims, as they fear that some Muslims might change their religion. This is important, as according to him, Christianity is believed to have an agenda to Christianise the peoples of this country.

Siten @ Rondi Daud, also agree that dialogue is the only way for us to know and be tolerant in religious life. Violence is not an option, and causes problems for all parties. In his commentary on the decision of the Appeals Court to prohibit the Catholic Church periodical, *Herald-The Catholic Weekly (Herald)* from using the term "Allah" on 22 October 2013, he forwards a very positive message on interfaith relations, whereby according to him, "we love each other, even our enemies," and Christians opt to be patient and pray for the parties involved to receive guidance. In addition, he states that "Christianity teaches us to love all men as though we love ourselves." In the Bible, there are three chapters that speak of this issue clearly, Matthew 5:55, Luke 6:27, and Luke 6:35. In other words, even though the Christians were hurt by the decision to prevent the use of "Allah," they decide to be tolerant and forgiving.

Pastor Demianus Robin, also agree that Muslim-Christian relations in this country can be improved through dialogue. This is the only way for us to know one another. Furthermore, although one could not agree on all issues, at least we need a channel to state our views. This communication channel should be open at all times so related issues can be handled properly. In addition, he also stresses that each party must be rational in dialogue and not be emotional so an issue can be discussed properly and smoothly. However, he admits that dialogue is restricted, as one has to be open to listen and analyse the facts presented by a dialogue partner. This is because religion is a sensitive issue and contains deeply-embedded sentiments and emotions. Therefore, creating a culture of dialogue among the Muslims and Christians especially is a positive step that should be supported by all.

## CONCLUSION

The climate of Muslim-Christian relations is much influenced by issues related to beliefs and perceptions held. Sometimes, seemingly trivial issues may leave a deeper impact on adherents of these two faiths. A lack of communication between the two communities is among the sources of misunderstanding. This dialogue programme is then seen as a good option to rectify this problem. In addition, the PH government could be a catalyst to this dialogue, and it could help to solve these issues in a positive manner. It is hoped that this open policy of the PH government could lead to a more harmonious path and prevent conflict due to difference in religion and beliefs.

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