

Inter-religious Dialogue in Malaysia: Past Experience, Present Scenario and Future Challenges

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Abstract

Inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia has taken place more than a century ago either in the form of 'dialogue of life' or in the form of intellectual discourse. 'Dialogue of life' normally occurs in a superficial ways of interaction such as 'open house' during festive seasons and daily interaction in market places, offices or schools while dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse occurs in official events such as forum, seminar and public lecture. Earliest endeavours of inter-religious dialogue were championed by non-Muslim organizations with the aim to protect their rights that was allegedly threatened with the execution of Islamization policy in 1980s. The involvement of Muslim's organizations could only be seen until 1990s with a pioneering attempt by Center for Civilizational Dialogue (University of Malaya) in 1995 that aimed to generate greater inter-religious understanding. The implementation of inter-religious dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse however is still limited due to its nature which is apparently more appealing to the intellectuals' community. On top of that, inter-religious dialogue also facing constant objections by some critics due to misunderstanding of the actual goals of inter-religious dialogue. Therefore, correct understanding about the concept of inter-religious dialogue must be nurtured among the masses prior to commencing any inter-religious dialogue program.

Keywords: Inter-religious dialogue; Intellectual discourse, Understanding

Introduction

Recent survey on ethnic relations conducted by Merdeka Center in 2011 revealed a less encouraging result. The survey reports a decline in public confidence in healthy inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations. From the survey, the percentage of those who felt that people in the country were "getting closer together" declined from 64% in 2006 to 36% in 2011 whilst only 37% Malaysian believed that ethnic relations would "improve in the next ten years" compared to 43% in 2006. This result reflects the inter-religious and inter-ethnic relation in Malaysia is still not up to scratch and inter-religious dialogue that allegedly has a long history in this country seems to have no significant impact on improving inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations. The following discussion therefore will explore the role of inter-religious dialogue in the past, current practice and potential challenges that awaits.

Malaysia's Past Experience in Inter-religious Dialogue

Dialogue of Life

Many researchers consider multi-religious and multi-ethnic coexistence that we experience every day since long time ago as a form of

inter-religious dialogue apart from dialogue in the form of discourse and collaborative work. Ghazali (2005) depicts interaction and communication among people of different religions and ethnicity in socio-economic activities that they have experienced over more than a century ago as a form of inter-religious dialogue. This interaction however occurs in a superficial ways such as the open house culture in each festive season.

Shaharom (2004) also describes interaction that occurs among people of different religious and ethnic background in residential areas, hospitals, schools, markets or workplaces as dialogue of life. This form of dialogue has been identified over the centuries ago. In the case of *Baba* and *Nyonya* or Chinese *Peranakan* (Descendent) in Melaka interaction that took place among their ancestors had turned into assimilation (Vaughan, 1974).

Dialogue of Collaborative Work

Working on a project and doing charity programs together in a multi-religious setting (Shahrom, 2004) are among examples of dialogue of collaborative work. Other examples can be seen in the efforts of some NGOs' Muslim and non-Muslim alike, in the fight of universal humanity's issues such as environmental, consumerism, poverty, education, drugs, AIDS, globalization and democracy issues (Ahmad Sunawari, 2003).

Dialogue of Discourse

The two forms of dialogue aforementioned take place in an informal and unstructured setting. The dialogue of discourse however is prearranged and organized. Ahmad Sunawari (2003) has classified inter-religious dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse into three types i.e. bilateral (e.g. Muslim-Christian dialogue), trilateral, (e.g. Muslim, Christian and Jewish dialogue) and multi-lateral (e.g. Dialogue among Abrahamic faith).

Even though Ghazali (2005) acknowledges the presence of dialogue of life, he doubts the success of the implementation of inter-religious dialogue in its real sense namely dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse. In unveiling the history of inter-religious dialogue, Ghazali (2005) asserts that it can only be identified through the establishment of inter-religious organizations not the inter-religious dialogue program. One of the earliest inter-religious organizations identified in 1956 was inter-religious Organization (MIRO) which aimed to promote mutual understanding and cooperation among all religions. Unfortunately, this organization was vanished post 1969 incident. Its role then was taken over by National Unity Board, a government body chaired by the late Tun V.T Sambanthan. Non-government organization was represented by the Bishop's Institute of Inter-religious Affairs (BIIRA) after 1969 and Malaysian Consultative Council for the Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs was established in 1983 (Ghazali, 2005).

In 2005, a research on the implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia was conducted by Khairunnizam entitled, *Reality behind the Application of Inter-Faith Dialogue in Malaysia: A Study on Inter-Faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF) and Pusat Dialog Peradaban (Center for Civilizational Dialogue)*. This research also explores the history of the implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia. Based on the study of the two organizations, inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia is deemed to have existed as early as 1950s. This is evident with the establishment of World Council for Inter-Faith Cooperation in 1958. In 1963, it operated under a different name i.e. Malaysian Inter-Religious Organisation and officially known as Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF) from 1986 until today.

The real implementation of inter-religious dialogue program can be traced back in the early 1980 as a result of disenchantment of the non-Muslim community towards Islamization policy. The policy was originally introduced by

the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohamad as a measure to control the growth of Islamic resurgence that exacerbated hostility between Malays and non-Malays (Hussin, 1990).

Number of efforts under the Islamization plan supposedly championed the notion of moderate Islam in the light of multi-cultural setting of Malaysia (Yeoh, 2006). Unfortunately, due to lack of information about the Islamization policy, its content and implementation, it had engendered adverse effects such as misunderstanding and protest among non-Muslim that eventually lead to the implementation of dialogue (Khairunnizam, 2005). Other researches also state that the implementation of inter-religious dialogue was not so apparent until the Islamization policy was implemented by the government in 1982. Even though inter-religious dialogue had taken place since 1950, the actual application or implementation could only be seen in the early 1980.

This circumstance explained why most of the earliest inter-religious dialogue efforts were initiated and dominated by the non-Muslim organizations and leaders. Some Muslim organization back then only involved as participants. For example, in October 1980, *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM) (Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement) sent its members to an inter-religious seminar organized by Young Men Christian Organization (YMCA) with a Partners of People of Other Faiths. Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) and ALIRAN were two other Muslim organizations that used to involve in inter-religious dialogue (Ghazali, 2005). University of Malaya finally made a breakthrough effort among Muslim organizations to initiate an international seminar on Islam and Confucianism in March 1995. This historic event was well received by the non-Muslim especially the Chinese community. This attempt signified Muslim openness toward other religions and cultural heritage hence detached from the traditional position of communal Islam (Osman, 2008).

Few government agencies, NGOs as well as some higher education institutions had also been identified as among organizations that involved in inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia within the past decade. Among those organizations are Pure Life Society, Fostering Inter-religious Encounters (FIRE), International Movement for a Just World (JUST), Malaysian Inter-faith Network (MIN) *Akademi Kajian Ketamadunan* (Academy of Civilizational Studies) (AKK), Faculty of Islamic Studies of *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia* (UKM) (National University of Malaysia) (UKM), Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Center for Civilizational Dialogue of University of Malaya (UM) and *Institut Kefahaman Islam* (IKIM) (Institute of Islamic Understanding) (Ghazali, 2005).

Current State of Inter-religious Dialogue Practice

Current state of inter-religious dialogue can be described as the dialogue in the form of dialogue of discourse. Despite dialogue is allegedly to have been synonymous with Malaysian society based on past history, the journey towards a successful inter-religious dialogue program is still long as the participation from Muslims community in general and Islamic organizations in particular is still poor compared to the non-Muslim. It also denotes the awareness of Malaysian society about the importance of inter-religious dialogue are still lacking. Ghazali (2005) therefore views that inter-religious dialogue in its real sense has not even started. Rohaini et. al. (2011) also share similar opinion. According to them, even though there are many inter-religious dialogue had been implemented by NGOs, but it was merely a regular meeting of diverse groups which consequently produced no concrete outcome.

Few studies conducted to examine public perception toward inter-religious dialogue revealed varying results. For instance, a research conducted by Azrinah (2009) to

assess the perception of fourth year students from Faculty of Education (University of Technology Malaysia) towards inter-religious dialogue revealed a promising result especially on the knowledge of students on inter-religious dialogue. The finding informed that the students generally understood that dialogue is crucial to clarify any misunderstanding that exists between members of other religions and the students also aware that there are diverse religious beliefs and practices in Malaysia given that Malaysia is a multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-cultural. Other finding from this research revealed that the students agreed that inter-religious dialogue can generate positive relationship among people of different religious background through increased understanding.

Other research that was carried out by Haslina (2011) to investigate the level of understanding, willingness and commitment of participants that consist of Malaysian public towards inter-religious dialogue however found opposite result. This research reported the level of understanding among Malaysian public were either low or moderate. The same result also applied to the level of willingness and commitment of the participants towards inter-religious dialogue.

The two opposite results in participants' understanding toward inter-religious dialogue were probably influenced by the educational background of the participants. Research undertaken by Azrinah (2009) consisted of undergraduate university's students as research participants while research carried out by Haslina (2011) were represented by people from mix educational background such as degree, master, PhD, STPM, SPM and PMR holders.

Dialogue in the form of discourse is normally take place in the format of intellectual discourse participated by religious representatives and this is part of the reality of implementation of inter-religious dialogue in the context of plural society in Malaysia (Khadijah & Suraya, 2009). Ghazali (2005) also recognizes intellectual

discourse that involves the meeting of religious representatives as one format of inter-religious dialogue. He however considers this type of dialogue is not suitable for the masses since the nature of its content which is too philosophical and theological.

According to Rahimin Affandi et. al. (2011) the implementation of dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse is still limited in this country given that this type of dialogue only occurs at higher education institutions or religious institution like *Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia* (IKIM) (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia). This limitation is due to the nature of the dialogue itself which requires the participants to fulfill certain conditions prior to participate in a dialogue such as having knowledge in religious or comparative religious study and textual study of religious sacred scripture.

Dialogue of discourse is also normally done in the format of workshop and forum. Example of workshop format can be seen in Inter-faith Dialogue Workshop related to the current issues in 2008 jointly organized by Center for Civilizational Dialogue and National Unity and Integration Department (Khadijah & Suraya, 2009) whereas example of inter-religious dialogue forum can be traced in Special Inter-religious Dialogue which brought together 80 religious leaders and representatives from various faith traditions to discuss legal issues and religious understanding in this country. This dialogue forum is jointly organized by then Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage and Center for Civilizational Dialogue (*Dialog Khas*, 2008).

Types of Dialogue

The current practice of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia can be classified into four types of dialogue i.e. collective inquiry; critical-dialogic education; conflict resolution and peace building; and community building and social action. The four types of dialogue were

originally developed by Zúñiga and Nagda (2001). The collective inquiry type denotes dialogue that occurs in organizational setting that aims to nurture participants' abilities to engage in collective thinking (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001). This type of dialogue can be identified in INSaF monthly meeting which normally discuss INSaF upcoming activities or programs and also some religious issues raised (Haridas, 2010).

The critical-dialogic education that normally occurs in university setting and seeks to explore group differences (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001) can be identified in inter-religious dialogue program like one that organized by USM Health Campus entitled "Peace and Happiness" (Nurhamizah et. al., 2010). "*Dialog antara Penganut Agama Mengenai Isu-isu Semasa*" (Inter-religious Dialogue on Current Issues) co-organized with *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional (JPNIN)* (Department of National Unity and Integration) (Center for Civilizational Dialogue [CCD], 2008) signifies the conflict resolution and peace building type of dialogue since it involves identifying issues of conflict, generate action plans and achieve a feasible agreement to conflicts or disputes (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001).

The community building and social action type of dialogue focuses on community concerns, building relationships and exploring possibilities of working together (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001). This type of dialogue therefore best describes "Hari Raya Celebration & Religious Harmony Workshop" organized by INSaF (*Religious Harmony Workshop*, 2010).

Future Challenges

Evaluation of Inter-religious Dialogue Outcomes

As mentioned previously, to this day there is still no information on how effective current models of inter-religious are in achieving its specific goals. Lack of knowledge on the outcomes of inter-religious dialogue will leave us with no clue on how far it can bring about

change in a multi-religious, multi ethnic and multi-cultural society like Malaysia. In order to evaluate the outcomes of inter-religious dialogue, inter-religious dialogue researcher should first consider the mechanisms to evaluate the dialogue program since for all this while most of organizations only rely on anecdotal reports, broadly defined interview processes, and non-systematic observation (McCoy & Scully, 2002).

Systematic Inter-religious Dialogue Design

Other than the evaluation method, inter-religious dialogue also faced with uncertainty in the design of the dialogue itself. Generally, most of organizations depend on the format of seminar, forum and public lecture regardless the type of dialogue it practices. The suitability of these formats with the types of dialogue is also unknown for instance, does the format of seminar or conference as practiced by most universities such as USM Health Campus is suitable for the critical-dialogic educational type of dialogue or does seminar or conference format also suitable for community building or conflict resolution? All these questions concern a systematic and effective inter-religious dialogue design. Developing dialogue design therefore becomes one of future challenges in inter-religious dialogue since without proper design, it is would be impossible for a dialogue program to achieve its goals.

Support from the Government

The continuous and unequivocal support from the government is crucial to ensure the success of inter-religious dialogue in the future. For this reason, Osman Bakar has proposed that the government should establish effective national policies or guidelines on inter-religious dialogue practice to ensure a healthy and productive dialogue. The government's support is also needed since the government is capable to provide facilities for inter-religious dialogue and promoting the benefits of dialogue through various channels, from school textbooks to the

mainstream media (*Guidelines or National Policy*, 2012).

By far, the government effort and commitment in supporting inter-religious dialogue is manifested through the establishment of *Jawatankuasa Mempromosikan Persefahaman dan Keharmonian Antara Penganut Agama* or JKMPKA (Special Committee to Promote Inter-Religious Understanding and Harmony) in 2010. This committee however has been persistently attacked with various types of objections by a number of critics which ranging from its name to the fact that it would not be a suitable medium for promoting harmony and religious understanding (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies [RSIS], 2011).

Public Understanding of Inter-religious Dialogue

Merdeka Center (2011) survey result reports the lack of maturity among Malaysian society in dealing with racial and religious issues. Only 38% of respondents felt that “our society is matured enough to discuss racial and religious matters openly” compared to 46% in 2006 and 55% of respondents believed that racial and religious issues are too sensitive to be discussed openly (Tan, 2011). All objections towards JKMPKA and the recent Merdeka Center survey result proved the lack of openness and negative attitudes among Malaysian towards inter-religious dialogue which allegedly caused by lack of understanding about the real concept of inter-religious dialogue. Haslina (2011) proved that understanding is the issue when half of the respondents still did not understand the concept of inter-religious dialogue.

Conclusion

History witnessed the evolution of inter-religious dialogue from a platform for the non-Muslim to seek clarification from the government regarding Islamization policy in 1980 to a platform to enhance inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding in 1990. The

implementation of inter-religious dialogue in these recent years apparently is more diverse in terms of the types (e.g. collective inquiry, critical-dialogic education, conflict resolution and community building) and designs. However, despite these many types that characterized Malaysia inter-religious dialogue scene, there are still no systematic and standard designs for each type of dialogue. Moreover, the extent to which these inter-religious dialogue programs are effective in achieving its goals including improving inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations are still vague. Confronted with public ignorance and indifference towards inter-religious dialogue, the effort should be directed at nurturing public awareness and understanding about inter-religious dialogue in the first place. This effort is crucial before the researchers and dialogue practitioners start to develop the systematic dialogue design and before the government start to impose any policies on inter-religious dialogue.

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