



Interreligious Dialogue in Malaysia: Issues of its Implementation

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ABSTRACT

As the world continues to evolve, problems among religious adherents have increasingly rendered the need for interreligious dialogue to achieve mutual understanding. The dialogue is crucial as it is a platform to communicate, understand, and get to know others of different backgrounds and beliefs. Nevertheless, the implementation of interreligious dialogue has led to some criticism on the credibility of its practice, especially in Islam. Therefore, this paper attempts to identify the challenges that occur throughout the implementation of Interreligious dialogue and their causes. This includes the arguments and the views of leaders or religious figures as well as intellectuals in favor or against interreligious dialogue. To do that, this study focuses on literature reviews and has discovered that the issues brought upon the implementation of inter-religious dialogue were based on a less accurate description of the actual ideas and practices. The finding also shows that not enough Interreligious dialogue modules are available and this gap must be filled with fresh perspectives to serve as a resource for future dialogues.

Keywords: Issues, Criticisms, Interreligious dialogue, Modules

1. Introduction

Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli and Jaffary Awang (2018) observe that before Malaya was colonized interreligious dialogue was spontaneous and it took the form of the life dialogue. Not much of theological issues were discussed. Rather, the interreligious relation occurred more on an everyday life basis such as transaction, commerce, and marriage. Interreligious relation was generally harmonious.

According to Ramli and Awang's findings, Portuguese, British and Japanese colonists were the ones who changed the harmonious landscape of Malaya. While the Portuguese attempted to impose marriages between Christians and local people, the Japanese had stirred up conflicts between the Chinese and Malays. On the other hand, British colonists worsened the social tension by further segregating different races to different locations based on respective economic activities. Malays were placed in villages as most of them worked as fishermen and farmers. Chinese got to live in the cities because most were traders. Indians, on the other hand, were located in rubber and palm oil plantations.

The interference of colonists made it difficult for the country 'Malaysia' to be established post-independence. Just twelve years after independence, there was 13th May 1969 incident, which involved clash and bloodshed between Malays and Chinese, resulting in the death of more than a hundred people.

Since then, efforts were taken by the government to mend the bond among different races and facilitate in the unity among Malaysian people. Hereafter, there are many initiatives done through dialogue albeit not interreligious dialogue per se. The practice of interreligious dialogue became instrumental as a reaction to Islamisation process beginning in the early 1970s. Non-Muslim religious leaders worried that more Islamic values were imbued in the governmental sectors. They perceived Islamisation as a threat to their identity and religious survival. A platform named Malaysian Council for Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Taoists (MCCBHST) was established to discuss common fear among Non-Muslims. Since then, there was a response to this concern by some Muslim NGOs such as *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM) or Malaysia Islamic Youth Movement. Henceforth, activities of interreligious dialogue blossomed.

Interreligious dialogue was a platform to communicate, understand, and get to know others of different beliefs and backgrounds to achieve a mutual understanding. It is also found to be the most appropriate medium to be utilized in multi-racial countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. Having said that, there are concerns in interreligious dialogue implementation.

This paper purports to identify the issues that occurred and the challenges that must be overcome in the practice of interreligious dialogue in Malaysia by exploring some views and criticisms of Malaysian scholars such as Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli, Jaffary Awang, Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Wan Sabri Wan Yusuf, and Arfah Ab Majid. Besides, the views of Anne Hege Grung, and Andrew Orton are taken into account.

2. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research method in the form of a literature review, with the primary purpose of introducing readers to the most recent library research on the topic of interreligious dialogue. The data collection is based on two main approaches: primary data and secondary data collection (Quran and Hadith). The researcher uses this data to examine the difficulties that arise as well as the challenges that must be overcome throughout the practice of interreligious dialogue.

3. Criticism and Rejection of Interreligious Dialogue

In this age of globalization, dialogue is one of the primary means of recognising and celebrating diversity. Interreligious dialogue is very important for different religious believers to communicate with each other and find a solution to any misunderstanding. This platform is critical in instilling harmony and fostering mutual understanding along with upholding their individual religious convictions. Various ideological threats have long been entrenched in Malaysia, bringing a new way of thinking that contradicts with *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, the Islamic school of thought which is considered the mainstream and the school which applies a robust and most reliable process in solving Muslims' issues in general, according to the majority of scholars in the field. It follows that the stance held by *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* is the stance that is referred to in creating proper guidelines in interreligious dialogue.

The first issue of interreligious dialogue as perceived by some Muslims is the equation of religious pluralism to interreligious dialogue, as understood by some Westerners and Muslim philosophers alike (Khalif Muammar A. Harris, 2015). It seems that the equation is necessary in keeping up with the modern trend. religious pluralism. It follows that it is vital to accept the version of truth that is presented by other religions. According to *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, this is problematic because there is hierarchy of truths and that Allah alone is the absolute Truth. It implies that the only true and approved religion in the sight of Allah is Islam based on verse 3:19 of the Qur'an.

Through his writing on the openness brought about by interreligious dialogue, Syamsuddin Arif (2014) echoed a similar sentiment. In fact, his writing in rejecting Interreligious dialogue is harsher and sharper, stating that the way interreligious dialogue is intended and executed will only bring people closer to scepticism. This is because he claimed that interreligious dialogue promotes the idea of all religions have equal access to truth. This is the idea of religious pluralism as mentioned previously. The idea of religious pluralism also carries and supports this equality of truth. As a result, if this claim is correct, interreligious dialogue and religious pluralism become the same because they share common notions and perspectives.

According to Earnie Elmie Hilmi, Kamarudin Salleh, and Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman (2019), some Malaysian scholars have defined interreligious dialogue as religious pluralism in their publications. They argue that religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue are common ideas based on the development of both terms' definitions. The definitions are crucial as they serve as a benchmark for describing a new concept. In this case, it is critical to look into the relationship between the two to look for any connection or parallel.

The *Projek Dialog* or Dialogue Project is a website that provides a space and platform for anyone who wishes to speak about religious and racial tolerance. It is a forum that aims to promote debate and understanding across different religions, races, and even ideas or philosophies. The concept of living together is "putting the value of equality, harmony, and peace between religions," according to one of the works released through this conversation space.

According to Anis Malik Thoha (2011), one of the views shared by pluralist thinkers is the principle of equality in religion. This also raises problems about the relationship between interreligious dialogue and religious pluralism. As a result, this research is critical in acquiring evidence and validating the relationship between the two.

Many parties are concerned about ideological threats and criticism like this because it includes religion and will generate doubts in the Malaysian community in particular. This research is critical since it is not a trivial matter when it comes to the understanding of religious pluralism. This is because the critiques and issues raised will ruin the practice of interreligious dialogue's image and legitimacy.

4. Issues of Interreligious Dialogue Implementation in Malaysia

The objection and criticism against interreligious discourse should not be dismissed lightly as these come from prominent individuals rather than a group of people. Syamsuddin Arif (2014) wrote that a Muslim must engage with the non-Muslims by performing da'wah with full responsibility, debate with knowledge, and lastly declare a war if there are no other ways. It differs from interreligious dialogue, which assumes that all religions are equally true, according to the author. The author also claimed that attempting and practising interreligious dialogue will only push one closer to disbelieving Islam. This declaration strikes a significant blow to the interreligious dialogue's credibility in pursuit of Islamic knowledge.

Syamsuddin Arif (2014) rejected interreligious dialogue because he disagreed with the three rules that dialogue participants must abide in the practice of interreligious dialogue; 1) all members are equal; 2) members should accept that beliefs of others are not necessarily wrong; and 3) all members are to put aside major differences and discuss issues that demonstrate similarities among religions. Syamsuddin Arif (2014) also added that Fazlur Rahman and Naquib al-Attas both criticised the practice of interreligious dialogue in everyday life, claiming that it might lead to theological confusion, compromise, syncretism, relativism, and even pluralism, all of which can lead to apostasy.

The researcher discovered that some scholars have fairly discussed and criticised interreligious dialogue, such as Robert Hunt, Albert Sundararaj Walter, Tun Mahathir Mohamad, Wan Sabri Wan Yusuf, Arfah Ab Majid, Kate Zebiri, and John Azumah as

found in the Doctor of Philosophy thesis by Khairulnizam Mat Karim (2015). This is a significant percentage that comes from intellectuals and should be taken into account while debating the issues. John Azumah (2002), in a paper titled "The Integrity of Interreligious dialogue," presented reasons for the rejection of interreligious dialogue by the Muslim community, specifically: i) theological issues; ii) the widespread belief that truth assertions are the biggest obstacles to dialogue ; iii) challenges inherited from tradition that relate to negativity and hostile portrayals of one another; iv) past burdens and the importance of honesty to oneself and interlocutors in dialogue; and v) challenges in re-examining perceptions of others based on existing realities.

Additionally, Wan Sabri Wan Yusuf and Arfah Ab Majid (2014) that despite interreligious dialogue being used and well appreciated in recent years, interreligious dialogue in Malaysia still has challenges in gaining the support of the country's population. Misinformed information on interreligious dialogue, such as its connection to proselytising and religious pluralism, was more prevalent than accurate information, which led to unfavourable perceptions and hesitations about participating in such dialogue. Based on the researcher's point of view, if this assertion is true, it is a very serious problem in the discipline of interreligious dialogue since it entails a tough attack that can affect various levels of society, causing one's faith to falter.

Some Western academics also offer explanations and justifications for rejecting Interreligious dialogue. One of the reasons, according to Anne Hege Grung (2011), is that it leads to the rise of syncretism in its practise. This is because, if a religion does not follow the implementation criteria put out by the authentic teachings, a free and tolerant debate allows for a mixing of opinions and beliefs. It again has to do with how religion is represented in interreligious discussions, but this time there is a worry about the thinning of religious lines. Most interreligious dialogue participants who seek to include spiritual or theological elements outside of a common ethical objective are familiar with this criticism. Even though Christians make up a sizable portion of the population where the discussion is taking place, certain Christian communities express their fear about syncretism.

Furthermore, it will open space for followers of other religions to attack from the standpoint of belief, particularly in Christianity, where there will be intra-religious clashes among those who hold different views. Pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism are three different standpoints on salvation. Freeman (2017) explained that people who believe in exclusivism believe that Jesus is the sole saviour of mankind, whilst those who believe in inclusivism believe that any religion can save its believers in their own way.

Besides, Orton (2016) noted that the selection of dialogue members by non-governmental groups is skewed, with the majority of youngsters and women being overlooked despite their significant role in the social landscape. As a result, the voices and perspectives of these groups would be ignored, and the interreligious dialogue will be dominated by a small group of men, leaving other groups unrepresented. Prejudice based on gender or age must be addressed to improve the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue.

The issue expressed against the practise of interreligious dialogue is that absolute truth is compromised. In this sense, some Western and Islamic intellectuals share the same opinion when it comes to rejecting interreligious dialogue as a meeting point. St. Augustinus, a Christian bishop and theologian remarked that the initial Christian convictions were restrictive in character, but that the passage of time forced its tenets' philosophy to alter to a more inclusive one (Syamsuddin Arif, 2017). He believes this is due to the interreligious dialogue's rules, which state that (i) dialogue participants are equal, (ii) all religions are not necessarily true, and (iii) leaving aside the main problem that is a point of conflict between religions.

5. Impediments and Difficulties in Engaging in Interreligious Dialogue

There is no denying that there are impediments and difficulties in engaging in such dialogue. Researcher have divided them into three categories: introduction, practice, and acceptance. In terms of introduction, the word "interreligious dialogue" itself needs to be presented and explained more frequently, particularly in nations with multi-racial societies. This is because interreligious dialogue is a highly effective platform in fostering and promoting social harmony. For instance, Siti Sofia Md Nasir (2018) referred to a heated "cyber war" between Prof. Dr. P. Ramasamy (Chief Minister of Penang II) and Prof. Dato' Arif Perkasa Dr. Mohd Asri bin Zainul Abidin

(Mufti of Perlis). In order to bring back harmony and to avoid the conflict from getting worse, former Minister in Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs), Dr. Mujahid Rawa called for a dialogue session between the men.

This demonstrates the necessity for frequent formal discourse sessions to educate and open people's minds about religion. It is also critical not only to handle any concern, but also to prevent any undesired disputes from arising. It is great that the government uses this platform to address racial issues and at the same time demonstrates that Interreligious dialogue is an excellent platform for developing interreligious cooperation.

Meanwhile, the practice is viewed as too narrowed down to the intellectual sphere (Rahimin Affandi Abd. Rahim et.al, 2011). It is usually exclusively executed and mobilised at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) and other institutes of Higher Education, but not in the public network. However, the Ministry of National Unity has made a huge step in promoting dialogue particularly among the youth, and to demonstrate that interreligious dialogue is one of the most effective means of achieving national concord. This shows how important it is to practise interreligious dialogue at all levels of society so that the resulting confusion and extremism can be resolved objectively without succumbing to emotions, thus preventing bad behaviours.

Apart from that, one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome in Malaysia is the absence of dialogue participants. This is because the dialogue members must be chosen based on a set of characteristics, such as academic background, experience, and general knowledge, in order to match the demands and requirements of the dialogue. Every conversation member, according to Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli and Jaffary Awang (2014), must have competence and abilities in dialogue knowledge in order to create a dialogue session that is intellectually and ethically sound. Based on the researcher's view, in dialogue, a person is not a representative of his/her religion but he/she is only voicing out his/her perspective about the issues.

Furthermore, a fundamental issue in the practise of Interreligious dialogue is the lack of modules or standards established to meet the criteria of dialogue while keeping the values and beliefs, in line with Islamic perspectives. Khairulnizam Mat Karim

(2015) said that devising and designing an appropriate new module is critical to effectively address a disagreement in the future. Governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia should take the construction of new modules in the application of interreligious dialogue seriously in order to ensure that interreligious conversation can be implemented systematically according to the established processes.

Among the challenges that are also faced in the field of Interreligious dialogue is in the post-Covid era, which is the change from the aspect of physical and face-to-face implementation to discussion in the virtual world. According to Muhammad Hamnan Hibrahim (2020), based on the head of the Education and Human Capital Development Cluster of the Malaysian Professors Academy, Professor Dr Rosna Awang Hashim stated that this change process also affects many other parties, especially teachers, lecturers and students from the learning aspect which previously met face to face but switched to screen display. In this regard, the dialogue process and also dialogue members need to learn and adapt in a new arena to strengthen the quality of Interreligious dialogue practices.

Interreligious dialogue is still not entirely recognised by the community, which poses a difficulty in terms of acceptance. Some Malaysians are still doubtful of the Interreligious dialogue, believing it to be too religiously exclusive. This kind of criticism was made by figures such as Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Robert Hunt, and Sundaraj Walter (Khairulnizam Mat Karim, 2015).

6. Preliminary Analysis of Emerging Factors of Criticisms of Interreligious Dialogue

To protect the reputation of Interreligious dialogue, the criticisms and objections to the practice must be taken seriously. The weakness of its implementation is likely the source of objection in some quarters. Therefore, this researcher has identified five emerging factors that contribute to the criticism of inter-religious discourse: (1) misunderstanding of the concept of interreligious discourse; (2) lack of ethical adherence; (3) limited knowledge of the process of *da'wah*; (4) lack of authoritative dialogues; and (5) lack of effective dialogue modules.

Based on the preliminary findings, the criticism arises from a misunderstanding of the concept of interreligious dialogue, highly likely to be interpreted through the works of Western scholars. In fact, Muslim academics and intellectuals have extensively developed the fundamentals and notions between the science of discourse and faith based on Islamic principles in order to build a harmonious co-existence. However, there is no disputing that there is a degree of openness in interpreting a notion that leads to varied interpretations, particularly under the subjects of comparative religions.

Quite possibly, the objections are the result of personal opinions on the dialogue members who do not adhere to dialogue ethics, thus causing misconceptions in the community or among scholars. Ethical dialogue behaviors are important as these are the key to controlling and shaping religious discourse in front of the world. Therefore, it is important to get religious organisations to be involved to provide monitoring and record tracking to ensure that an interreligious dialogue abides by their religious teachings and perspectives.

A limited and rigid grasp of the concept and technique of *da'wah* also contributes to the series of criticism against Interreligious dialogue. Some argue that this type of discourse is not included under the technique of *da'wah*. Nonetheless, a cursory examination reveals that this *da'wah* is not a kind of coercion. Propositions referenced in the Qur'an (*Surah al-Baqarah*: 256):

“There is no compulsion in religion; truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error; therefore, whoever disbelieves in the Shaitan and believes in Allah he indeed has laid hold on the firmest handle, which shall not break off, and Allah is Hearing, Knowing.”

This shows the connection between *da'wah* and interreligious dialogue, that it is performed openly and without force.

Another criticism is the lack of knowledgeable dialogue members that open to discriminatory selection of dialogue panels based on age and gender. Panelists should be carefully chosen as they represent and provide arguments on behalf of their religions. Age and gender are not as important as their backgrounds are. Selection should be made based on their expertise about the topic and scope of the

discussion to ensure suitability. They must be capable of conversing calmly not provocatively, attentively, and clearly.

The absence of effective modules as guidelines is harming the practice of Interreligious dialogue. Proper modules, for instance, should be designed especially for those representing Islam to avoid misinterpretation and confusion. There is no doubt that such modules have been developed concerning the scientific gap in Interreligious dialogue, however, there are still concerns regarding interreligious disputes as well as prevarication. Thus, these loopholes need to be closed by creating more effective and comprehensive guidelines.

These are several challenges to the continuation of the practice of Interreligious dialogue in Malaysia. These criticisms came from academics and scholars who are highly reputable and have significantly contributed to the field of Islamic knowledge. Nevertheless, this researcher has discovered that there is no evidence that the practice of Interreligious dialogue contradicts with Islamic perspective. This researcher also believes that the objections stem from the misunderstanding of the importance of dialogue which is a process of identifying existing differences and calmly discussing them. Dialogue does not require all humans to be alike; but the willingness to explain and accept the differences of others and focus on their similarities.

7. Conclusion

The concerns and objections that arise must be evaluated and studied against the truth because it affects religions and beliefs. Furthermore, the obstacles to its practice must be understood in order to effectively address and overcome them. Intellectuals and religious leaders largely pioneered the science of interreligious dialogue. In this light, this research is critical in determining the validity of the criticisms directed at the Interreligious dialogue, which is mostly undertaken by elite groups with huge followers and societal influence. However, proper etiquette in dispute situations is critical so that it can be debated using scholarly arguments rather than emotions while remaining in harmony with one another. The researcher not found any evidence that shows Interreligious dialogue are born from the epistemological issues and lead to the issues and the criticisms. In reality, academics have discovered a variety of evidence demonstrating the value of interreligious

dialogue, particularly in promoting national unity. Furthermore, a study is needed to build and form a new module to complement the existing modules, which are still less published, particularly in Malaysia. Proper modules are critical for a basic guide to the dialogue participants, as well as in managing the practice of dialogue so that there is a safety net in the ocean of freedom.

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