

LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AMONG ISLAMIC NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs) MEMBERS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Interreligious dialogue is one of the methods of interaction between followers of other religions. It's nothing new in this country. Interfaith dialogue is important especially for countries whose people are multiracial, hereditary and religious. In Malaysia, this dialogue takes place due to a number of issues especially involving matters related to religious authority, implementation of Islamic law, religious conversion and many others. In this regard, the Muslim community especially through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will mobilize their energy and minds to defend the rights of the Muslim community. However, at the same time, the voices and views of the non-Muslim community will also be heard and considered fairly to demonstrate the perfection of Islam as Rahmatan lil Alamin. This article discusses the level of understanding of interreligious dialogue among members of Islamic non-government organizations (NGOs) and uses a quantitative design and purposive sampling method. A total of three hundred and fifty-one members of Islamic NGOs were involved as study respondents. The reliability value of the instrument that has been built is 0.907. The result showed that respondents' level of understanding is high, with the mean = 3.96. The finding showed that most Islamic NGO members understood the concept, objective, and importance of interreligious dialogue as a medium of unity in a country made up of diverse peoples. Therefore, there is a need that the implementation of interreligious dialogue is necessary to go a step further by giving more attention to the aspects of practical to glorify harmony and unity in Malaysia again.

Keywords: Dialogue, Religion, Interreligious dialogue, religious tolerance; Islamic NGO.

INTRODUCTION

In general, the dialogue refers to a literature genre in the form of conversation or words spoken by individuals as representing characters in the drama or film. Meanwhile, in particular, the term dialogue is a term that refers to a form of discussion or negotiation existed from different opinions about specific issues and matters (Noresah Baharom, 2010; The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002). According to Ibn Manzur (n.d), dialogue (*al-ḥiwār*) refers to returning something to something. Its derivative word, *al-muḥāwarah*, on the other hand, means to restore a conversation or word between people who speak to each other. Rohi Ba^c albaki (1995) gives a broader meaning, that is, the word *ḥāwara* (dialogue) has the same meaning as the words *ḥādatha* (conversation), *bāḥatha* (consultation), and *nāqasya* (discussion), which all refer to the meaning: to dialogue with, hold a conversation with, talk with, speak with, converse with, discourse with, confer with, hold talks with, to discuss with, to debate with, argue with, reason with and others. In short, the dialogue is a form of interaction between two or more parties with a purpose. It is a mechanism built to

create an environment of communication and interaction between the diversity of human civilization elements.

The purpose is to foster understanding and harmony in thinking, religion, and culture. Therefore, it had encouraged the United Nations (UN) to declare 2001 as the 'Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations' (United Nations 2001). The dialogue process requires openness in the give and take of a view. However, the definition of dialogue depends on the demands and needs in dialogue as long as it gives different views between two or more parties in discussing an issue. According to the Islamic perspective, interreligious dialogue is part of the important teachings of religion described in the Qur'ān, in Chapter 3, verses 64. The verses told about invited followers of other religions, *ahl al-kitāb* (the People of the Book) to adhere to each other the '*kalimatun sawā*' - principles of similarity to each other (common terms). In Malaysia's context, Article 3 of the Federal Constitution states that Islam is the religion of the Federation and has a different position from other religions in Malaysia. Although all citizens are given the right to freedom of religion, adherents of other religions cannot spread their beliefs among Muslims. Some religious communities still have a high level of sensitivity to other religions. Nevertheless, this Constitution's provisions should not be an obstacle for the community to have an interreligious dialogue but as a platform to discuss religion within a transparent and regulated scope.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN RELIGIONS

The terms of dialogue when referring to interfaith conversations or consultations, or planning are more specific and exclusive. In addition to the openness of participation, this process requires strength from all aspects, including understanding, tradition, religion, culture, and environment, whether in the group itself and others. Ghazali (2009) stated that interreligious dialogue is the willingness and ability of every religious group to respond to any issues involving all parties. Willingness in this aspect means terms every member of the dialogue must be honest and sincere when trying to build any form of agreement or solution. Everything must be clear, impartial, and free from implicit agendas. Therefore, the dialogue is not preaching or mission. Meanwhile, ability means the ability of knowledge towards any issues raised in the religion. In response, the process of this dialogue shall take into account the common interest and must be made in the form of consultation and approval. There should be an open-minded attitude and mutual respect in any matters that cannot be mutually agreed upon (for certain reasons). Therefore, such an attitude can form understanding, respect, empathy, and sympathy for friends and dialogue community.

In *Religion and Pluralistic Co-Existence*, Kamar Oniah (2010) gave viewed that interreligious dialogue is a discussion and discourse involving a multi-religious community to understand perceptions and stances related to an issue or to solve problems that exist among them. According to Syed Z. Abedin (1991), interreligious dialogue must be understood as a process in which there are various parties from different religious backgrounds. They were united and agree on each other's identity and integrity, holding hands in common and supporting mutual respect to preventing threats that hinder them. It is a platform to respect all religions' beliefs by taking an open attitude and respect for any form of differences. During the dialogue process, all religions and participation need to unite to face obstacles and threats.

Among Western scholars such as Hans Kung, his understanding of interreligious dialogue as a discourse among religious scholars discusses various religions' significant components. In this discourse, the religious scholar must explain and describe the basis of religious beliefs that they

represented. In the meantime, any allegations contrary to the vigilance will not be questioned (Ahmad Husni 2011). His opinion is similar to a statement made by Garfinkel (2004). According to Garfinkel (2004), interreligious dialogue is not for the purpose of debate. The idea must be structured to include all aspects of dialogue, such as conversation, setting, goals, and format. In other words, the characteristic of this interreligious dialogue is not a comprehensive concept. The objective is to understand each other, solve problems together, and not be preaching to other religions.

Therefore, interreligious dialogue can be understood as a form of a conversation between various belief perspectives, especially in religious aspects. Either the conversation is about to understand each other's belief or look at a particular issue that has been agreed to be discussed together. It depends on the goals and format all of the parties are agree upon to the dialogue. As for Ramli Awang (2008), interreligious dialogue is an initial process of direct communication between every religious figure with an aim to build a peaceful and harmonious future through high commitment and mutual respect for each other.

SIGNIFICANT INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, religion is closely related to race or ethnicity identification. The majority race is Malays who are Muslims, followed by the Chinese who are Buddhists, Confucius and Taoism, and the Indians who are Hindus and others. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010), the total Malaysian population is about 28.3 million comprises 91.8 percent of citizens composing ethnic groups of Bumiputera (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%), and others (0.7%), while 8.2 percent are comprising of non-citizens. Meanwhile, the religious population recorded that Islam is the most widespread religion practiced by the community in Malaysia with a rate of 61.3 percent, followed by Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), and Hinduism (6.3%). The minority groups consist of traditional religions, and non-religious comprise only 3.4 percent.

Various religions and ethnic groups in Malaysia's society usually create differences in culture, thought, and way of life. The situation will indirectly encourage negative perceptions and attitudes if there is no awareness in society to foster diversity understanding. Several policies have been implemented on the part of the government to ensure national unity and integration have been preserved since the country achieved independence through the Federal Constitution and the National Principles' axis. Nevertheless, issues of racial and religious tensions are on the rise every year. For example, a cow-head protest that has touched the sensitivities of Hindus in Malaysia (Utusan Malaysia 10 September 2009) and the issue of the word "Allah" which has led to the several churches attacked in the Klang Valley and several other states (Utusan Malaysia 11 January 2010). Besides, a study entitled '*Religious Tension and Tolerance in Malaysia: A Survey of Malaysian Newspaper Reports on Religious Tension Incidents from 2004-2007*' also outlines twelve forms of racial and religious conflicts that have been identified throughout that period of three years. These include the issue of short message service (SMS) of hundreds of apostate Muslims, the issue of the *Interfaith Commission* and the Article 11 Crisis, and the issue of Malaysia being a secular or Islamic country (Abdul Salam Muhammad Shukri 2009).

An even greater concern, the statistics of the Societal Stress Index (SSI) made by the Department of National Unity and National Integration (2012) have always shown an increase of 19.9 cases per million in 2012 2011, which is 18.2 cases per million population. Meanwhile, in the Global Peace Index (2011 & 2012), Malaysia's position has dropped from 19th to 20th in the last

two years from another 150 countries. The increase in the rate of stress in the society in this country gives an idea of the efforts implemented to ensure harmony between various races and religions are still not enough. The existing policy is less effective due to the understanding and tolerance among religious people in this country is still at an unsatisfactory level and needs to be improved to ensure that harmony and unity between various religions are well preserved. The factor may be due to the lack of understanding of dialogue and this practice's dimness in society. In this regard, the understanding of interfaith and racial understanding needs to be nurtured by cultivating interfaith dialogue. Those should start the starting point for the cultivation of this dialogue with qualifications among Islamic NGOs. In Malaysia, to enhance the activities of this dialogue begins from an understanding of religious tolerance. Religious tolerance must begin from the process of knowing, understanding and recognizing the background and basis of religious beliefs involved in tolerance in some countries. These aspects will help the appreciation of individuals and society on the concept of acceptance and enrichment of existing differences and which contribute to the creation of a harmonious society (Nur Farhana et. al. 2020) this aspect of religious tolerance is repeatedly explained in the policies of the Muslim community especially in Malaysia which are the Quran and hadith. It is fundamental in Islam, all human beings regardless of origin, religion, race or nationality, all of which are brothers and should live in peace and harmony, mutual respect and respect, and work together for good and love. On the other hand, all members in society need to reject vehemently efforts that can lead to hostility, disunity and disharmony of society. These practices and awareness can be formed through continuous interfaith dialogue activities implemented (Ismoil Saifnazarov et. al. 2020)

RESEARCH METHODS

The methodology used in this study is a quantitative method with survey research. The study's main instrument was a set of questionnaires, which was built based on the objectives. The instrument was validated by a group of experts from different academic backgrounds. The reliability test had been conducted involving 30 respondents obtained randomly from the same elements in population studies. The obtained value of Cronbach's alpha was 0.907. The actual studies involving 351 respondents, which consist of eight Islamic NGOs from Klang Valley, Johor and Penang.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings revealed that the level of understanding of NGO members on the interreligious dialogue was moderately high, with a total average mean of 3.96. The overall analysis showed that the items related to the basic understanding of interreligious dialogue, namely the definition, concept, and theme of the dialogue, are at a high and moderately high level. The only item that measures the goal of interreligious dialogue is to discuss religious issues, and it is at a moderate level. Respondents' understanding of all the items tested in interreligious dialogue is closely related to their understanding of religion's goal or role.

Table 1: Level of Understanding of Interreligious Dialogue

No.	Item	Mean	Level
1	Interreligious dialogue is the interaction between two or more adherents of different religions.	4.22	High
2	Interreligious dialogue aims to foster an attitude of respect for the beliefs and practices of other religions.	4.10	High

3	Interreligious dialogue contributes to the formation of national integration	4.04	High
4	The more committed a person is to his religion, the higher his respect for other religions.	4.04	High
5	Interreligious dialogue is a process of understanding the beliefs and practices of other religions.	4.03	High
6	The goal of interreligious dialogue is to discuss religious issues.	3.61	Moderate
7	The interreligious dialogue program is open to all.	3.92	Moderately High
8	The interreligious dialogue covers social, political, scientific aspects and economics.	3.97	Moderately High
9	Interreligious dialogue is part of the demands of religion.	3.70	Moderately High
Average		3.96	Moderately High

According to Azizan (2008), understanding religion and spiritual practice are essential to encourage people to appreciate the values of life that are pure for generating a tremendous civilized living. Understanding and openness to accept and understand the diversity of religions and ideologies perfectly able to fill the space in the dialogue; therefore, it can be used to discuss and resolve issues related to religion. Besides that, the same attitudes were also built to deal with any agreement or disagreement of opinion. The history had been seen in the series of dialogues between Prophet Muhammad PBUH with the society during that era which consisted of various believers from Pagans, Jews, and Christians. This fact is in line with the teachings brought by the previous Prophets and Messengers as recorded by the Qur'an. For example, the dialogue between the Prophet Noah and his polytheistic people (Abdullah 2007) is about their deviant beliefs.

Allah Almighty in His words:

Surely We sent Noah to his people. He said, "Indeed, I am sent to you with a clear warning. that you should worship none but Allah. I truly fear for you the torment of a painful Day." The disbelieving chiefs of his people said, "We see you only as a human being like ourselves, and we see that no one follows you except the lowliest among us, who do so hastily without thinking. We do not see anything that makes all of you any better than us. In fact, we think you are liars." He said, "O my people! Consider if I stand on a clear proof from my Lord and He has blessed me with a mercy from Himself, which you fail to see. Should we then force it on you against your will? O my people! I do not ask you for a payment for this message. My reward is only from Allah. And I will never dismiss the believers, for they will surely meet their Lord. But I can see that you are a people acting ignorantly.

(Chapter Hud 11: 25-29)

In addition to the dialogue with the polytheists, the Qur'an highlights the dialogue that took place between the Prophet Muhammad PBUH and *ahl al-kitāb* (the People of the Book) consisting of Jews and Christians. Allah Almighty says:

The Jews and Christians each claim that none will enter Paradise except those of their own faith. These are their desires. Reply, O Prophet, "Show me your proof if what you say is true." But no! Whoever submits themselves to Allah and does good will have their reward with their Lord. And there will be no fear for them, nor will they grieve.

(Chapter al-Baqarah 2: 111-112)

Similar to the religious discussion that took place in the previous, the form of dialogue presented with the Christians was through the concept that presented by the Quran. In fact, Syed Farid al -Atas (2008), the dialogue that took place with the Christians was one of the earliest dialogues that pioneered interreligious dialogue and at the same time responding to the deviant Christian teaching. Allah Almighty says:

Those who say, "Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary," have certainly fallen into disbelief. The Messiah himself said, "O Children of Israel! Worship Allah—my Lord and your Lord." Whoever associates others with Allah in worship will surely be forbidden Paradise by Allah. Their home will be the Fire. And the wrongdoers will have no helpers.

(Chapter al-Ma'idah 5:72)

In this regard, Kamar Oniah (2010) writes:

"... all issue that are of common interest to the dialogue partners and their faith communities can be discussed, as also those issues that are general interest to all people, such as justice, world peace, the environment, among others. Interfaith dialogue can also try to resolve issues between faith communities so that can be diffused"

Based on the above discussions, it is inevitable that the dialogue will discuss religious issues. The purpose is not to judge each other but to build a connection point between them. This fact is similar to the statement made by Ataullah Siddiqui (1997) about the dialogue, and it is a communication with other religions and communities to build a better understanding. Dialogue represents the relationship between two individuals or two communities that want to communicate about beliefs, ways of life with each other, and identify areas of conflict and areas in which they can work together. Dialogue is to reduce conflicts of interest, that is, by sharing ways of thinking and views to understand each other, reduce differences and conflicts that exist, and identify some of the same occurring issues and lead to focus on certain field of studies.

The discussion of religious issues in the dialogue, however, is tied to the principles and rules specific to ensure the process is run smoothly. As Azizan Baharuddin (2008) stated, during the dialogue process happened, it is necessary to respect each other's beliefs and practice. Dialogue is not an opportunity or place for religion to be modified or criticized. Aspects or civilizations related to articles of faith should not be touched in the dialogue. In religion, this is referred to as an intra-personal dimension. The aspects that can be touched on may be the inter-personal dimension or even the social dimension of a religion (for example, aspects related to the issue of justice, sympathy for the oppressed, family and others).

CONCLUSION

A dialogue's effectiveness depends on the person's understanding about few basic things, especially involving the concept, objective, and approach in dialogue. In this country's context, the efforts to hold interreligious dialogue are led by many Islamic NGOs. Thus, it is necessary among those directly involved in the dialogue to complete the preparation in the knowledge of dialogue. The purpose of interreligious dialogue is to build an understanding of the differences that exist between believers. Although aspects of doctrine and belief cannot be found in common, other aspects involving universal aspects such as values, ethics and humanity can still be discussed through their respective religious approaches. It is in accordance with the concept of religion as 'a way of life'.

Besides, it is important for dialogue to practice tolerance and open-mindedness in responding to similarities and differences.

Acknowledgement

The authors are thankful to the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for sponsoring this research. This study was conducted using the *Cabaran Perdana* fund (Project Code DCP-2017-009 / 3).

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