Muslim Religious Practice and Non-Muslim Response in Malaysian Inter-Religious Discourse

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Abstract

In Malaysia, Islam has the highest number of adherents followed by Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and other religions. This different religious background sometimes causes misunderstanding and disagreement among multi-religious people. This study discusses Muslim religious practice and the response from non-Muslim in Malaysian inter-religious discourse, with the objectives of (1) identifying the meanings of Muslim practice disagreed by non-Muslim, and (2) analysing the factors that create the disagreement. The discussion of meaning is based on the language interpretation, either literal or figurative meanings while the analysis of factor of disagreement applies the pragmatic approach proposed by Crystal (1999). The data in the discussion relate to the four Muslim's practices, namely *azan*, *korban* during *Hari Raya Aidil Adha*, *hudud*, and Zakir Naik's talk. The data were the controversial religious issues from 2013 to 2016 taken from local newspapers and interviews with religious authorities. The discussion shows that the disagreement emerges due to the practice are interpreted as insensitive and ignorance about others. The result also shows that there are political and media factors behind the disagreement. The findings reveal that tolerance and mutual understanding among people from different religions are crucial in empowering inter-religious discourse and enjoying their differences.

Keywords: Inter-religious Discourse analysis; Language and religion; Religious language.

1.Introduction

Islam is the religion that has the highest number of adherents in Malaysia, that is, 61.3%, followed by Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), Hinduism (6.3%), Confucianism and Taoism (1.3%), and other religions (2.1%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). Islam shall be constitutionally the religion of the Federation, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony. This different religious background sometimes causes misunderstanding and disagreement among multi-religious people. Some Muslim religious practices were criticised by non-Muslim due to misunderstanding and misinterpretation between them. The critic then led them to religious conflict and disintegration of society which involves issues of security and public order, such as terrorism, extremism and religious riots.

However, the engagements to the religious issues and confusions give many advantages in favour of the majority of believers, i.e. Muslims. In dealing with the religious issues, the civilisation, history of religion, culture, etymological terms and epistemology of knowledge are often highlighted for the purpose of the measurement between right and wrong or legal and illegal. In addition, the court had to be used to determine the 'truth' of the socio-pragmatics of the religious practice. From 2006 to 2016, there were at least 20 inter-religious issues chronologically reported in local newspapers.As the majority are Muslims, most of the issues involvetheir religious practices which responded by non-Muslims, especially Hindu and Christians.

This study discusses Muslim religious practice and the response from non-Muslim in Malaysian inter-religious discourse, with the objectives of (1) identifying the meanings of Muslim religious practice that create non-Muslim disagreement, and (2) analysing the factors that create non-Muslim disagreement.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Malaysian Inter-Religious Discourse

Inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia can be traced to the year 1956 when *Persatuan Hidup Murni* (The Pure Life Society), a Hindu charitable body, pursued the establishment of a global interfaith cooperation council, based in Malaysia. In the early stage, this council was known as World Council for Inter-Faith Cooperation (Khairulnizam Mat Karim, 2005). In 1963, it has developed and operated under the new name of *Pertubuhan Antara Agama Malaysia* (Interfaith Association of Malaysia) until 1986 when it was later known as Inter-Faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSAF) (Bakar, 1987).

Interaction and interreligious understanding among members is fostered through religious dialogue and symbolic friendship acts, such as gathering for Religious Harmony Day and Organ Donation Campaign. *Majlis Penasihat Perpaduan Negara* (National Unity Advisory Council) was established on 23rd February 1970, and later

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the National Unity Department was responsible for protecting and nurturing ethnic unity in the Malaysian society (Baharuddin *et al.*, 2008).

In 1983, non-Muslim religious leaders primarily of religious officials from the four main religions had come to a consensus to form Malaysian Consultative for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) which was also known as *Majlis Perundingan Agama-Agama Malaysia* (Consultative Council on Religions Malaysia). The chief role of the council is to act as a consultative and liaison body. The council has expressed concern about the Islamisation policy of the government as well as other human rights and social issues. The council acts as a watchdog organisation monitoring enactments and policies that affect the religious life of minority religious groups in the country (Baharuddin *et al.,* 2008).

On 15th February 2003, the Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN) was founded through the efforts of Anwar Fazal, who was a key player in developing global codes and guidelines on civil society and human rights. He gathered organizations from all religious faiths which include about 30 participating organizations ranging from the MCCBCHST, Sisters in Islam, the Council of Churches of Malaysia and others. MIN was founded with the aim of promoting religions dialogue among faith organizations in Malaysia as well as trying to foster understanding on common issues of concern amongst its participants (Baharuddin *et al.,* 2008).

On 14th December 2004, the government established the Committee of National Service and Unity to discuss issues pertaining to unity between the races and national integration. This committee also sits to analyse and recommends amendment or change on the existing development policies. This committee was comprised of 11 members from various races and political parties headed by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of national unity, Maximus Ongkili (Baharuddin *et al.,* 2008).

In 2010, the Interfaith Relations Working Committee was established under the purview of National Unity and Integration Department. Upon approval from the Cabinet, it was renamed as Committee to Promote Inter-Department of Islamic Development, Institute of Islamic Understanding and the MCCBCHST. The committee was a framework for managing religious and cultural polarities. The idea was to involve religious leaders, leaders of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) as well as the relevant government departments like the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) and the Unity Department. The involvement of any active politicians was prohibited (Baharuddin *et al.,* 2008).

One of the committee's roles was to provide linkages between federal government agencies, state departments and religious leaders. The committee was to provide the mechanism for resolving administrative issues on religious matters, not only by facilitating discussions among the parties involved but also through studies of existing policies and regulations. The committee's recommendations would be forwarded to the Cabinet and it would be up to it whether to accept them. The highlight was on the facilitation of dialogues with the different stakeholders. This is important to ensure things are done properly while observing the sensitivities of all religions (Baharuddin *et al.,* 2008).

2.2. Factors of Non-Muslim Disagreement

In the Malaysian context, there is witnessed few gruesome inter-ethnic clashes such as May 1969 and March 2002 where several lives and properties were lost. Few researchers have attribute and perform these inter-ethnic conflicts to unaddressed and overlooked prejudicial attitude among multi-religious and multi-ethnic Malaysian society (Sri *et al.*, 2009).

The result from an interview conducted by Abdul Rahman Embong (Abdul, 2001) has further revealed the reality of prejudicial attitude that exist among Malaysian society. One of the informants for instance admits that ethnic relations are not as close as it seems because 'a lot of jealousy and prejudices toward one another still exist'. Another informant said that, the inter-ethnic or inter-religious harmony or unity that we currently experience is bounded on the basis of toleration not so much on civility and mutual reciprocity. The unity is born "out of necessity…it is unity for survival" unity that is "instrumental, collective and artificial" and not "unity of the heart" (Abdul, 2001).

There is fear into Islam or afraid of Islam. It also relates to anti-Islam or anti-Muslim, so it can be refers to Islamophobia (Allen, 2010). Allen added that Islamophobia is fear to religion itself (Islam), Muslims and the culture in Islam (Allen, 2010). The patterns of phobia towards Islam are various. For example, Gottschalk & Gabriel Greenberg wrote in his book Islamophobia making Muslims the enemy how some symbols affect the phobia towards Islam (Gottschalk and Greenberg, 2008). Besides that, the characters of Muslims and the certain concepts in Islam are also creating the phobia among them. Oius & Roald reported that in United States and Europeans, both experience so much in the using of symbols especially related to Islam and Muslims (Ouis and Roald, 2003). By the way, the patterns and the forms of Islamophobia is actually different depend on political and economic impact to the country. Wearing veil among the Muslim women makes people afraid of them. More than that there are considered as uncivilized.

The forms of Islamophobia show that this phenomenon impact on the public perception and it can occur in the form of individual expression and also through policies and institutions including a police state. After identifying this form of Islamophobia, then all strategies to address this matter should be also based on this classification or division. This is to ensure that any efforts to correct the public perception on the issue of Islamophobia can be done effectively. Islamophobia also have an impact on the socio-economic development.

The steady rise of Islamophobia continues to threaten global as well as regional peace, security and stability by impeding efforts to promote a multicultural approach founded understanding, respect and tolerance of religious

diversity. Muslims in the West are going through a difficult time wherein their fundamental rights are being violated and eroded in the wake of an upsurge in Islamophobia (Ihsanoglu, 2010).

The presence and spread of Islam and Muslims has created concerns for the West. The first concern is that if Islam's influence spread across Europe, Christianity will lose its unifying effect and that the future of Europe's population crisis And growing population of Muslim immigrants, faced Europe with an identity crisis. And that is why Muslims population growth has intensified Islamophobia (Alizadeh *et al.*, 2016).

Islamophobia in Malaysia is not as serious as in western. It is because the majority of Malaysians are Muslims. But, there are still happen here and there unsatisfied with Islam either from Muslims or non-Muslims. In the context of Malaysia, the cases happen such as uploading the photograph welcoming to breakfast in *Ramadhan* with pork dish (bak kut teh), claims using the word of "Allah" in the church by Christians and Organizing Programme "I Want to Touch a Dog".

Although the Islamophobia is only through perception, hatred against Islam has been translated into a variety of shapes and implications that are not good for the image of Muslims and Islam itself. Islamophobia is able to give very significant implications on the lives of Muslims and harmony in society generally and it also affects the socio-economic development, including the effects of individual mental and physical.

3. Methodology

The discussion of religious meaning is based on the interpretation approach of *ḥaml al-lughat*(language interpretation) which is applied in Sunni pragmatic analysis, i.e. how language is interpreted, either in literal or figurative meanings (Mohamed and Yunis, 2013) or denotative or connotative meanings (Murphy and Lexical, 2010). The pragmatic approach proposed by Crystal (1999); the language from its users' point of view, especially the choices they make, the constraints they face when using the language in social interaction, and the effect of the use of the language on other users also will be applied in the analysis of religious disagreement.

The data in the discussion relate to the four Muslim's practices which are slightly received negative response from non-Muslim, namely fasting, *hudud*, *korban* during *Hari Raya Aidil Adha*, and Zakir Naik's talk. The data were the controversial religious issues from 2013 to 2016 as *azan* and *hudud* involved responses from Buddhists while *korban* during *Hari Raya Aidil Adha* and Zakir Naik's talk ignited responses from Hindus. The data were taken from local online newspapers, i.e. The Star and The Malay Mail; and interviews with two religious authorities, each from Malaysian Buddhist Association and Malaysia Hindu Sangam. The data from interviews then are labelled with Q and A while from newspapers are indicated by the newspapers' name and date. The data are analysed by taking into consideration the semantics and context of inter-religious discourse's production. For the purpose of reliability, inter-rater checking and rechecking will be made.

Azan refers to the Muslim summons to prayer, from a mosque five times a day. In Penang, some non-Muslims were uncomfortable with the azan and made some complaints because of the disturbance reason. This issue became controversial when Penang Mufti was alleged for being too accommodative with the complaints as he was accused for banning the azan (The Malay Mail Online, 2015).

Hudud is the punishment that ascribed by Allah (SWT) and is thus unchangeable. The Kelantan State Legislative Assembly passed a *hudud* bill amending the Syariah Criminal Code II 1993 (The Sun Daily, 2015). However almost all non-Muslim leaders in ruling parties, especially from Sabah and Sarawak, declared to Prime Minister Najib Razak that their parties would not support any amendments to federal laws that would introduce *hudud* in Kelantan (The Star Online, 2016).

The issue of *korban* during *Hari Raya Aidil Adha*became controversial when the students in several schools in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur had witnessed the ritual slaughter of cattle in their school compounds in conjunction with the Aidiladha celebration (The Malay Mail Online, 2013). The incidents drew flak from various quarters, who said that the practice should not be carried out at schools as it would hurt the sensitivities of the children, especially Hindus who consider the cow as a sacred animal.

Zakir Abdul Karim Naik is an Indian Islamic preacher, and the founder and president of the Islamic Research Foundation (IRF). He is also the founder of the 'comparative religion' Peace TV channel through which he reaches a reported 100 million viewers. In Malaysia, he became controversial when the police barred his talk, scheduled on 17 April 2016 and to be held at University Technical Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), it stirred a commotion and sent many debates flying on social media (The Malay Mail Online, 2013).

4. Findings
4.1. The Meanings of Muslim Religious Practice and Non-Muslim Disagreement
4.1.1. *Azan*

The Penang state government led by the Democratic Action Party (DAP) came under fire in social media, particularly from Malay groups, for banning the use of loudspeakers in mosques and *surau* other than for azan. A letter from the Penang Mufti's Office dated September 1 stated it had been agreed that the external loudspeakers can only be used for azan, or the call to prayer, while only internal loudspeakers can be used for other programmes and activities at the mosques and *suraus* (The Malay Mail Online, 2015).

Based on example 1, there were several complaints about the loudspeakers outside the mosque and *surau* because of the disturbance reason. However, it was not clear who complained against the azan at the the Penang Islamic Religious Affairs Department. It could be made by Muslims not by non-Muslims. It was possible that the disturbance not only faced by non-Muslims, but also by Muslims (The Star Online, 2015).

(1) The Star Online (2015):

Ten complaints had been received by the Penang Islamic Religious Affairs Department on the use of loudspeakers in mosques and *surau* from January 2012 until May 2015. This included external loudspeakers for recordings of Quran reciters or *ceramah* before the call for prayer.

The Buddhist respondent shares his experience in dealing with a similar Buddhist practice in calling others in the morning as stated in example 2.

(2) Q: What do you think about the issue of azan?

A: Buddhists experienced that they have the same practice as *azan* (calling others in the morning), but they stopped the practice because of disturbing others.

After receiving negative response from the public because of the disturbance reason, the practice then was stopped. However, the respondent agreed that azan doesn't disturb others. Denotatively, azan is understood by non-Muslim as a Muslim practice as a reminder of prayer time, and in Malaysia, generally this is already acceptable for many decades. Some non-Muslims agreed that sometimes it is uncomfortable, but it is not a big problem. Connotatively, what they question is apart from azan, there isthe use of loudspeakers for Quranic recitals and *zikir* that could disturb those inside and outside the mosque, not only non-Muslims but also Muslims.

4.1.2. *Hudud*

The implementation of *hudud* is rejected by non-Muslims and they do not support any amendments to federal laws that would introduce *hudud* in Kelantan. It can be referred to the example 3 (The Star Online, 2016).

(3) The Star Online (2016):

Almost all non-Muslim leaders in Barisan, especially from Sabah and Sarawak, declared that their parties would not support any amendments to federal laws that would introduce *hudud* in Kelantan.

The Buddhist respondent is purposely selected from Kelantan in order to get the non-Muslim understanding and response. The respondent disagrees with *hudud* by explaining that its implementation is a matter of disturbance for non-Muslims because it will affect their freedom as described in example 4.

(4) Q: What do you think about the issue of *hudud*?

Hudud is only for Muslims, this *hudud* then would affect the lives of other people from other religions

To non-Muslims, *hudud* will create phobia and fear within them particularly its implementation. The female respondent view is made based on her experience since she had been fined by the local authority because of her female employees were wearing no hijab during the inspection. According to the authority, as the employer, she was responsible to the Islamic law implementation although she was a non-Muslim.

Denotatively, the idea of *hudud* is understood by non-Muslims as a political agenda to gain Muslim support. They accepted the constitutional provisions for the (Malay) Muslims on the basis that the provisions might a result of (Malay) Muslims hegemony of the country. However, the provisions were not meant to justify a dominance of (Malay) Muslims practice and culture. Connotatively, what they question is how *hudud* will be implemented and how to assured its justice to non-Muslims.

4.1.3. *Korban* During *Hari Raya Aidil Adha*

In example 5, non-Muslims disagreed with the way Muslims performed the slaughter of cattle or *korban* in school's area, but then Muslims informed them to raise their objections with the Council of Rulers (The Malay Mail Online, 2013).

(5) The Malay Mail Online (2013):

Deputy Education Minister P. Kamalanathan should raise his objections on the slaughter of cattle in schools for *Hari Raya Aidiladha* with the Council of Rulers if he feels so strongly against it, Perkasa said today.

Nevertheless, in dealing with this sensitive issue, the Hindu respondent stresses two things; the purpose of reporting the issue, and the school where the practice was held, as mentioned in example 6.

(6) Q: What do you think about the issue of *korban*?

A: The way people think and the motive of the newspapers when reporting the issue, for examples *Sinar Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*. School is a place to educate the students. Why it happened? [We] disagree how it was practised because of making children confuse (the way of practice).

From his view, korban is an Islamic ritual which contrasts to Hindu practice. The purpose of reporting tended to provoke conflict among two different religions. To avoid any confuse among Hindu students, the way of practice must be taken into consideration their sensitivity.Denotatively, the meaning of korban is literally understood by non-Muslims as a Muslim ritual, and therefore they respect the practice and do not oppose it. Connotatively, what they questionedis the place where the Muslims practised the ritual, which for them is unpermitted.

4.1.4. Zakir Naik's Talk

Hindus opposed Zakir Naik's talk because according to them, he did not understand the racial and cultural scope of the country, and whoever speaks ill about other religions, such as Hindu will only provoke the sentiments of the Hindus, and may unnecessarily create uneasiness among races. It is shown in example 7 (The Malay Mail Online, 2016).

(7) The Malay Mail Online (2016):

The Malaysian Hindu Sangam (MHS) urged authorities to deport Dr Zakir Naik, and claimed that the controversial Muslim speaker's presence here has already caused much "uneasiness" among Malaysians. "Having a foreigner who does not understand the racial and cultural scope of the country, and who speaks ill of other religions

such as Hindu will only provoke the sentiments of the Hindus here, and may unnecessarily create uneasiness among races.

The Hindu respondent from Johor insists that Dr. Zakir Naik upset other religious devotees, especially Hindus, because in Malaysia many years before, no one attempted to do what he does, i.e. comparing openly Islam and Hinduism as shown in example 8.

(8) Q: What do you think about the issue of Dr. Zakir Naik?

A: The way people think and the motive of newspapers when reporting the Dr. Zakir Naik should not mention things that can upset other people in his talk mainly to the Hindus. This is because we have long lived together despite different religions. Dr. Zakir Naik is not eligible to touch on in his talk about Hinduism.

According to the respondent, Dr. Zakir Naik is not eligible and has no right to talk about Hinduism and there is no necessity to compare between the two religions publicly. Only Hindu can talk about Hinduism.Denotatively, Muslim religious talk is understood by non-Muslims as a way of spreading Islam in order to make the Muslims understand about their religion. Connotatively, what Hindus question is the motive of Zakir Naik's talk which continuously insulting Hinduism. The talk is strongly opposed because he has no right to compare between Islam and Hinduism.

4.2. Factors of Non-Muslim Disagreement

4.2.1. *Azan*

The Buddhist respondent highlights two factors that igniting the issue. There are politician role and media role as he insists in examples 9. Some politicians tend to become heroes in protecting people's rights, and then their party is seen to be responsible to the people. They politicised the issue by discrediting their political enemies. In terms of media role, there is untrue reporting about the issue in newspapers, and thus causing confusion among readers.

(9) Q: What are the factors that make the issue hot?

A: a. Politicians: They want to become heroes.

b. Media: There is incorrect reporting from newspapers.

4.2.2. *Hudud*

The Buddhist respondent responds that the factors ignite this issue are human injustice, politics and inclusiveness as in example 10.

(10) Q: What are the factors that make the issue hot?

A: a. Humanities:For the non-Muslim, it is injustice.

b. Politics:The issue has been spun by politicians.

c. Implementation: No privatisation to its implementation.

The respondent stresses the value of humanity when non-Muslims are forced to follow *hudud* while they prefer the existing civil laws because it is a kind of injustice. *Hudud* will create phobia and fear within non-Muslims. A few of politicians has spun the information about the implementation of *hudud* by politicising it to gain their political support. The respondent also admits that there is no privatisation to the implementation of Islamic law. It means that *hudud* will not be implemented exclusively, but inclusively involving Muslims and non-Muslims.

4.2.3. Korban During Hari Raya Aidil Adha

Media is a main factor in speculating the issue as stated in example 11. According to the Hindu respondent that media is notorious for spreading false news, sensationalisms, defamations, and accusations. Within these range of services, citizens acquire information through various available sources that shapes their thoughts and perceptions.

(11) Q: What are the factors that make the issue hot?

A: a. Media: Role of media (news).

b. Politics: Politicization.

c. Religious person: They do not accept others.

Apart from media, the respondent highlights political factor along with religious leadership. This can be proven in the newspaper stating that there was a dispute between different religious leaders, especially Muslims and Hindus. On the one hand, the Deputy Education Minister, P Kamalanathan said the *korban* practice was banned following to complaints made by a Hindus who questioned the religious practice (*korban*) held in the school area in Puchong Jaya, which had non-Muslim students (Sinar, 2013). On the other hand, some Muslim leaders said that Muslims can practise their korban inside the school area because the purpose of having it is not to hurt Hindus.

4.2.4. Zakir Naik's Talk

The Hindu respondent suggests that having a foreigner who does not understand the racial and cultural scope of the country, and who speaks ill of other religions such as Hindu will only provoke the sentiments of the Hindus here, and may unnecessarily create uneasiness among races as in example 12.

(12) Q: What are the factors that make the issue hot?

A: a. Accuracy: Zakir Naik provided wrong fact in his talk about Hinduism.

b. Background: He is also not a Hindu and does not have authority to give a talk about Hinduism.

Zakir uses to present wrong facts in his talk about Hinduism. As a Muslim, he is not able to talk precisely about Hinduism as he does. Zakir Naik should not mention the things that can upset other peoples in his talk mainly to the

Hindu. He also does not have authority to give a talk about Hindu practice because he is not a Hindu. Based on Hinduism, only a sacred person among Hindus can talk about the religion. As Zakir is not a sacred person, therefore, he has no religious credential talking about Hinduism.

5. Conclusion

The discussion shows that the disagreement from non-Muslims emerges due to the Muslim practices which are interpreted as insensitive and ignorance about others. Insensitive relates to the practice of three issues in the study; *azan*, *hudud* and *korban*. From a religious call, azan turns to be a disturbance when it creates uncomfort from the using of loudspeakers for Quranic recital and *zikir*. *Hudud* creates Islamophobia due to its unclear practice, and *korban* reflects the need to reconsider the right place of the practice, particularly in school area. Nevertheless, ignorance refers only to Zakir Naik's talk. It is learnt that such talk has no reason to be held openly as no reason to compare between two different religions, Islam and Hinduism publicly.

The result also shows that there are political and media factors behind the disagreement, especially in creating religious prejudice and poor relation between one religion and another. As religion is open to be politicised, it is clear from the issue of *azan*, *hudud* and *korban* that religion is used as a means for political survival though people will be left behind in confusion. In Zakir Naik's issue, such religious credential granted to a religious speaker by the authorities is important in order to have right facts of religious explanation.

The findings support the research problem that tolerance and understanding the others are crucial in empowering inter-religious discourse in Malaysia. The main challenge is how people from different religions can learn to understand and enjoy their differences. Interaction and interreligious understanding among members must be fostered through religious sensitivity, tolerance and mutual understanding. At this level of interreligious understanding, the issues in inter-religious discourse should be discussed in inter-religious dialogue within committee members not in open debate discussion, such as in newspapers.

Acknowledgments

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