

Inter-Religious Dialogue Models in Malaysia

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Abstract

Over the years, many organizations have involved in the implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia. However, there are still those who doubt the role and purpose of inter-religious dialogue. This might be due to lack of information and understanding regarding the methodology of dialogue and also about different types that it may take. The present study is aimed at exploring a few models of inter-religious dialogue that have been practised by some organizations that actively involved in dialogue. The study focuses on a review of selected organizational or institutional dialogue models such as Center for Civilizational Dialogue (CCD), Students Representative Council of Malaysia Science University (Health Campus) and Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF). This study provides information concerning the various designs of inter-religious dialogue model in Malaysia and proposes that different designs of inter-religious dialogue rely on its different types and goals. It is found that, the commonly practiced type of dialogue in Malaysia is educational type which focuses on exploring inter-religious commonalities as well as differences which consequently will increase understanding and foster meaningful engagement between people of different ethnic and religious background in Malaysia. This type of dialogue is distinguished from conflict resolution types of dialogue which aims at identifying issues and generating action plans to conflicts or disputes.

Keywords: Inter-religious dialogue; Organizations; Models; Designs

Introduction

One of the most obvious phenomena of the world today concerning religion is the call for inter-faith dialogues (Ahmad Husni, 2011), where the present globalised world, with diverse religious, ethnic, cultural, social, economical and political backgrounds suggest the importance for a better understanding of one another through inter-religious dialogues. Despite having been practiced and well received in recent years, in reality, inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia is still struggling to win the trust of Malaysian society. Misguided information about inter-religious dialogue such as its association with religious pluralism and proselytization were greater than the correct information which instigated negative perceptions and reservations to engage in inter-religious dialogue. This preliminary survey therefore, seeks to reveal the information on inter-religious dialogue by exploring the models or types of dialogue that have been implemented in Malaysia by various organizations.

The Muslim and Christian Perspectives of Inter-Religious Dialogue

Al-Asfahani (1992), while examining the verses of the Qur'an pertaining to dialogue asserts that al-hiwar indicates that it is one form of communicational dialogue and it

is one of the means to attain the truth and to make readjustment to maintain a correct direction. Al-Faruqi (1992), a renowned Muslim authority in inter-faith dialogue especially in Muslim-Christian dialogue, defined dialogue as a “dimension of human consciousness provided that (as long as that consciousness is not skeptical), a category of the ethical sense (as long as that sense is not cynical). It is the altruistic arm of Islam and of Christianity, they reach beyond themselves”. He added that “dialogue is the removal of all barriers between men for a free intercourse of ideas where the categorical imperative is to let the sounder claim to the truth win. Dialogue disciplines our consciousness to recognize the truth inherent in realities and figurizations of realities beyond our usual ken and reach” (al-Faruqi, 1992). The final effect of dialogue therefore according to him, should be the establishment of truth and it must be consciously accepted by everybody.

Nasr (1995) states that inter-religious dialogue occurs whenever members of participating religions come together to discuss matters concerning their religions in order to improve understanding among each other. Nasr had also identified inter-religious dialogue as a solution to certain contentious problems and obstacles. The scope of dialogue therefore, centered on the mutual recognition and acknowledgment of “each religion by the other as a divinely ordained path for salvation in the strictly religious sense of the term” (Nasr, 1998). However, Swidler (1990) defines dialogue as a “conversation between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow”. Barker (1998) distinguishes inter-religious dialogue from debate and evangelism. According to him, inter-religious dialogue involves a meeting or a series of meeting between scholars from two or more religious communities. The meetings involve the discussion on key components of the religions that need to be clarified to the community members.

Even though discussion of religions is included in this meeting, conflicting claim of truth are not debated. Held separately, from dialogue, religious debate is a form of evangelism which targeting to convince the audience of the superiority of one’s religious position. Evangelism on the other hand, is aimed to convert others to one’s religious position and it always occurs in an informal circumstance unlike dialogue and debate which are more formal and highly structured.

In Church jargon, dialogue means “all positive constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to the truth and respect for freedom. It includes the witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions (Dialogue and Proclamation, 1991). Lochhead (1988) defines inter-religious dialogue as “a process of reciprocal communication between members of different world religions based on openness, respect and appreciation of different viewpoint”.

The Format of Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia

Even though inter-religious dialogue has already begun as early as 1950’s, the public awareness about its importance is still lacking let alone the commitment to participate in it (Basri, 2005). In Malaysia, inter-religious dialogue is being understood as intellectual discourse, forum or public lecture (Shahrom, 2004; Basri, 2005).

According to Basri (2005), dialogue as in intellectual discourse is not appropriate for the public as it requires participants’ competency in certain field of knowledge.

Other than intellectual discourse, inter-religious dialogue is also being organized in the form of workshop for example inter-faith dialogue workshop that jointly organized by *Pusat Dialog Peradaban* (Center for Civilizational Dialogue) and *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan*

Integrasi Nasional (Department of National Unity and Integration) (JPNIN) in 2008. There was also a forum called “Dialog Antara Agama Khas” (Special Inter-religious Dialogue) implemented by a ministry which was then known as Kementerian Perpaduan, Kebudayaan, Kesenian dan Warisan (Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage) and *Pusat Dialog Peradaban* (Center for Civilizational Dialogue) in 2008 which gathered 80 religious leaders and representatives from different religions to discuss legal issues and improve inter-religious understanding in Malaysia (Bernama, 2008).

Organizations involved in Inter-Religious Dialogue

Non-Government Organization (NGO) be it Muslim or non-Muslim plays an active role in promoting inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia. Among those organizations are Akademi Kajian Ketamadunan (Academy of Civilization Studies) (AKK), Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia) (IKIM), Islamic Propagation Society (IPSI), Islamic Information Services (IIS) representing Muslim organizations, Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF) under Pure Life Society, Fostering Inter-religious Encounters (FIRE), International Movement for a Just World (JUST), Malaysia Inter-faith Network (MIN) and Malaysia Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christian, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) and Archdiocesan Ministry of Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs (AMEIA) representing inter-faith and non-Muslim organizations.

Other than NGOs, some higher education institutions are also involved in inter-religious dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue in campus setting is normally initiated either by student's body or the administration departments. Example of those institutions are *Fakulti Pengajian Islam* (Faculty of Islamic Studies) (FPI), of *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*; Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (KIRKHS) of International

Islamic University Malaysia; *Pusat Dialog Peradaban* (Center for Civilizational Dialogue) (PDP) of Universiti of Malaya; Intellectual Youth Club (IYC) of International Islamic University Malaysia; Students Representative Council of Malaysia Science University (Health Campus) and Student Affairs Division of Multimedia University, (Melaka Campus).

Types of Dialogue Models

Zúñiga and Nagda (2001), has classified dialogue into four different types (which somehow in practice and might be overlapped). The first model is known as collective inquiry. This type of dialogue often occurs in organizational setting such as business, government agencies and non-profit agencies. It is a dialogue that focuses on nurturing participants' abilities to engage in collective thinking and inquiry for the development of meaningful relationship.

The second dialogue model which is commonly practiced in university setting is critical-dialogic education which primary goal is to explore group differences. Conflict resolution and peace building is the third type of dialogue model identified by Zúñiga and Nagda (2001). This model brings members from conflicting parties together to identify issues of conflict, generate action plans and if possible achieve a workable agreement to conflicts or disputes. The fourth dialogue model is community building and social action that focuses on community concerns, building relationships and exploring possibilities of working together. Even though it is difficult to find the exact similar criteria of these categories in Malaysia's inter-religious dialogue model, it still provides a general insight and framework to identify types of dialogue that have been implemented in Malaysia. Based on the analysis of the inter-religious dialogue goals, the presence of all four dialogue types is identifiable in some inter-religious dialogue program in Malaysia.

Generally, inter-religious dialogues in Malaysia, especially those that are based in higher education

institutions, aim to increase understanding and fostering meaningful relationship among people of diverse faiths and traditions. This type of dialogue therefore, best fits Zúñiga and Nagda's educational model of dialogue. Examples of organizations that practise this type of model are Islamic Propagation Society (IPSI); Intellectual Youth Club (IYC), IIUM and Students Representative Council of Malaysia Science University (Health Campus).

The second type that can be observed in Malaysia dialogue scene is the conflict resolution type. This type of dialogue involved discussion of divisive religious issues which are the common source of conflict and dispute among differing religious groups. It occurs in a closed setting and handled by professional body like Center for Civilizational Dialogue. Similarly, differing inter-religious dialogues that also take place in Malaysia include the community building and social action types of dialogue.

This 'community concern' type of dialogue is identified in one of Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia's (IKIM) inter-religious dialogues entitled, "*Peranan Agama dalam Menangani Masalah Sosial*" (Role of Religion in Dealing with Social Problems) and one of Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF) programmes called "A Decade of Creating a Culture of Peace, Justice and Healing". Collective inquiry type of dialogue has taken place in organizational monthly meetings especially organizations that composed of members of various religious groups such as INSaF and MCCBCHCT.

Critical-dialogic Education (Students Representative Council of Malaysia Science University (Health Campus))

Inter-religious dialogue is one of "*Minggu Penghayatan Islam*" (Islamic Appreciation Week) programmes that are being organized annually in USM Health Campus. The main objective of the implementation of dialogue programme is to cultivate better understanding

among people of diverse religions in Malaysia.

Themes include theological and universal values topic for example "The Concept of God" for the first Inter-religious Dialogue in 2008 and "Peace and Happiness" for the third inter-religious dialogue in 2010.

This dialogue program normally takes place at the USM Kubang Kerian main hall. Around 700 participants that filled the hall consist of students and the public from different religious and ethnic background. Four invited speakers representing different religions (usually four major religions in Malaysia i.e. Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism) will present their ideas for twenty minutes session for each speaker on the given topic while being moderated. The four presentation sessions will be followed by one question and answer session. This seminar usually takes only few hours between 8pm to 12am (held at night considering the availability of the students) (S. Mahusin et al., per.comm., December 27, 2010). This type of dialogue is commonly practised by several other higher education institutions in Malaysia. Universal topics, hundreds participants (mostly students), forum format, are among the distinctive features for this type of dialogue.

Conflict Resolution and Peace Building (Center for Civilizational Dialogue's Inter-religious Dialogue on Current Issues)

Dialogue programmes at this center encompass not only dialogue on religion but also all other important elements that constitute a civilization in general such as scientific knowledge, culture, philosophy, environment, ethics and so on. Dialogue on religions as practised by Center for Civilizational Dialogue generally has different designs depends on its different goals. One example of dialogue that took a seminar format that can be classified as educational types of dialogue was "Muslim Chinese Civilizational Dialogue" that was organized in 2005.

Other than public seminar, Center for

Civilizational Dialogue is also well-known for its expertise in conducting a closed dialogue programme for example one that was implemented in 2008 entitled “*Dialog antara Penganut Agama Mengenai Isu-isu Semasa*” (Inter-religious Dialogue on Current Issues) co-organized with *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional* (Department of National Unity and Integration) (JPNIN). This was a round-table dialogue which gathers stakeholders from different religions to discuss sensitive religious issues such as of *dakwah* and *murtad* among Muslim and conversion in general and its effect on divorce. This two days dialogue program main objective was to find the best solutions to contentious religious issues or problems.

This dialogue began with a briefing about the topic and ground rules of dialogue followed by paper presentation by invited speakers and the dialogue session or open discussion began soon afterwards. Unlike the typical educational model, this ‘conflict resolution’ type of dialogue ended with resolution and action plan (Mohd. Zaidi et al., 2008). Dialogue of this kind is rare in Malaysian dialogue scene due to its intimidating nature. For this reason, only professional body likes Center for Civilizational Dialogue and *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional* (Department of National Unity and Integration) (JPNIN) has made their attempt to venture this kind of dialogue.

Community Building and Social Action (INSaF’s Hari Raya Celebration & Religious Harmony Workshop)

In 2010, INSaF organized a programme called “Hari Raya Celebration & Religious Harmony Workshop” at The Pure Life Society. This brainstorming workshop was opened for everyone to encourage meaningful discussion in order to optimize religious harmony and promote “1 Malaysia” in practical ways at school, home, workplace and places of worship. This workshop was facilitated and led by Carolina Lopez, Thillia Chelliah, K. Rajkumar and

Mother Manggalam respectively.

The programme started at 3.30 pm with registration, tour of exhibition of world religions at the Temple of Universal Spirit and followed by prayer by Mother Manggalam and introductory address by John Gurusamy at 4 pm. The workshop began at 4.15 pm and followed by question and answer an hour later. Soon after the concluding remarks by the chairman of INSaF, Amir Farid Isahak, together they celebrated the Hari Raya celebrations.

The program continued with some prayers and re-commitment to the declaration on religious harmony. Before the programme ended with dinner, the participants were entertained with *salam* and nasyid choir. During the Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship in 2010, a total of 107 participants from various religious and ethnic backgrounds attended this celebration. INSaF has championed inter-religious dialogue that incorporates not only intellectual discussion but also social activities such as Hari Raya celebration. This kind of event is also more appealing to the grassroots compared to the other types of dialogue which focuses on the leaders and scholars. The spirit of ‘dialogue’ is embodied in the interaction process that occurs indirectly among the participants during the social activities.

INSaF has championed inter-religious dialogues encompassing intellectual discussions and social activities that appeal to the general public. It is hope that such dialogues would promote positive and effective interaction among the participants.

Collective Inquiry (INSaF’s monthly meeting)

The collective inquiry dialogue type can be identified in INSaF monthly meeting held at PLS Conference Room which not only opened to INSaF members but also to the public. This meeting usually starts at 8pm and will discuss INSaF upcoming activities or programs. Haridas (per.comm., December 16,

2010) considers the meeting as part of inter-faith dialogue since the committees itself consist of members from diverse ethnic, cultural and religious background and they do not only discuss INSaF activities but they also discuss religious issues that raised from time to time for instance the word of 'Allah' and the 'cow head' issue. Any issues will be clarified and understood at this committee level. The meeting therefore, can also act as a forum. This type of dialogue normally occurs at organizational level that consists of members from different religious and ethnic background like INSaF

Conclusion

Based on the survey, a few inter-religious dialogue models can be identified such as educational model, conflict resolution, community building and collective inquiry. There have been multiple dialogue models practiced by various organizations in Malaysia. Most of the models identified have been categorized based on the goal for example to increase understanding or to resolve a conflict not the design since there is no standard design for inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia even though those organizations shared the same goal. Knowledge on the various models of inter-religious dialogue is envisaged to promote more meaningful dialogues in the future. As we have identified in this study, the diversity of dialogue model in Malaysia is indeed a blessing as it may have served different needs at different levels of Malaysian community in general. As a result, more harmonious interaction between religious communities in Malaysia will be enhanced as it inspired to become a developed nation by 2020.

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