

Human Communication. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association. Vol. 13, No. 1, pp.43 - 56.

Exploring Roots, Recognizing Differences: Promoting Inter-Religious Communication in Malaysia

Abdul Muati Ahmad, Ph.D.
Communication Department,
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra Malaysia,
43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor,
MALAYSIA.
e-mail: abmuati@putra.upm.edu.my

Abstract

Malaysia is a unique country with a blend of multi-racial and multi-religious population. The people of Malaysia live harmoniously despite major differences in their beliefs and faith. Although the Malaysian constitution stated that Islam is an official religion of the country, the people are guaranteed of freedom to practice any religion. However, with the escalation of inter-religious conflicts elsewhere in the world, especially post-911 tragedy, Malaysians has to embark on promoting inter-religious communication in order to avoid misunderstanding. Even so, are Malaysians ready to share such understandings? This paper will discuss the views of Malaysians on their willingness to explore and recognize the faith of their fellow countrymen.

The September 11 tragedy marked a paradigm shift in religious thinking throughout the world. The tragedy has been one of the darkest episodes in human history especially for the Muslims. Post September 11 has changed the people; they seem to be less forgiving. Whenever there appears to be doubt over certain issues, the events of the attack are brought back into focus (Sunday Star, Jan 27, 2002). It is against this backdrop the Muslims have to work to explain the true face of Islam, a religion of peace. Muslims in predominantly non-Muslim countries such as the United States of America and Europe visited churches, synagogues, held meetings and seminars to explain to the people that the tragedy has nothing to do with Islam and what the religion is all about. The tense was felt even by the people in Muslim countries like Malaysia. On the night of January 25, 2002, about five hundred Malaysians of all major faiths gathered outside the Church of St Francis of Assisi in Kuala Lumpur to pray for peace and the ending of hostilities following the September 11 tragedy (The New Straits Times, Jan. 26, 2002). Such joint commitment to peace by the Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and Bahais was the first ever in Malaysia. For the first time the people of different religions listened to speeches delivered by representatives from various faiths concerning a same theme. The aim was definitely to prove that even though the methods of worshipping were different, the ultimate goal was to live together harmoniously in this world. The question is however, are Malaysians at large ready to share such understanding? In replying to a somewhat similar question in a function hosted by Baroness Uddin of Bethnal Green at the House of Lords in London on Monday, Feb. 25, 2002, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad stated that the government is in its way in setting up inter-faith associations in the country. The pace is a bit slow mainly because “the Muslim religious leaders feel uncomfortable about it” (The Star, Feb 27, 2002). In order not to complicate the situation, the government has recently turned down a proposal by Malaysian Bar Council and several NGOs to form an interfaith commission. Instead, as an alternative, the Malaysian government has avowed its commitment in encouraging interfaith dialogues (The Malaysian Bar, September 14, 2006).

The scenario

The scenario in Malaysia is unique. Of the total of slightly more than 24 million people, 60.4% are Muslims, 19.2% are Buddhists, 9.1% are Christians, 6.3% are Hindus and 5% are from other minority faiths such as Sikhism, Taoist, Confucianism, Bahaism and Paganism (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2006). The 1957 Constitution of Independence of Malaya stated that Islam is the religion of the Federation. However the Article 11 (1) of the constitution guarantees all citizens the freedom to profess and practice his or her own faith (the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, 1998). Therefore, religious wise the people of Malaysia is an assortment of multi-religious people. Malaysia has a pluralistic nature of society comprises people of diverse races, ethnic, tribes, cultures and religions. Apparently, religion according to Yousif (1998) is a key aspect of ethnic identity and solidarity in Malaysia. Article 60 of the Malaysian Constitution defines Malay as the one who professes the religion of Islam. Hence, any one from Malay ethnicity is automatically identified as a Muslim regardless of whether he is practicing or not. The Chinese by tradition are Buddhist, although significant numbers are Christians. A small number of them follow traditional Chinese religions such as Taoism and Confucianism. The Indians on the other hand are primarily Hindus, even though quite a number are Christians and Muslims. And a small number are Sikhs

and Bahais. Ethnic wise, the Malays made up an estimated 50.4% of the population, Chinese 23.7%, indigenous peoples 11%, Indian 7.1% and others 7.8% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2006). With such a diverse society, the situation is very volatile. The society is just like a time bomb. A wrong move by any party especially concerning sensitive issues like religion and race can escalate tension and conflict. An event such as September 11 if not handled carefully is capable of injecting discomfort into the society. As Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia once wrote,

“A plural, multi-religious society is living perpetually on the brink of catastrophe. Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims must be governed by moral and ethical considerations. The seeds of militancy are everywhere and each community must ensure that they will not germinate and multiply through discontent and alienation”. (Anwar, 1996).

Thus, communication between people of different religion is very vital in multi-religious society like Malaysia.

The study

The aim of this study is to explore the readiness of Malaysians to communicate with each other on issues related to their religions.

Specifically the objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the peoples' perception of their commitment towards their religions and their willingness to learn other religions.
2. Identify sources of religious information in the society.
3. Determine the roles of communication and media in disseminating inter-religious information in the country.

The total of 384 respondents was sampled out to represent the various groups of followers of different religions in the country. However, only 356 respondents have returned the completed questionnaires on time. Table 1 shows the percentages of respondents by their religions involved in the study.

Table 1: The Respondents.

Religion	Sample	%
Muslim	208	58.4
Buddhist	75	21.1
Christian	36	10.1
Hindu	24	6.7
Others	13	3.7
Total	356	100.0

A set of questionnaire was used to elicit information pertaining to the objectives of the study. The questionnaires comprise two parts. The first part was to obtain demographic information of the respondents. Whereas the second part was to see their perceptions towards their religion, other religions being practiced in the society and the roles played by the main stream media and the leaders of the country in promoting inter-religious communication amongst the people. The drop and pick-up method was used in order to guarantee return. Data gathered were processed by using SPSS software. Reliability test produced alpha value of 0.8742 which meant the questions were valid to be used as an instrument in the study.

The result

The results of the study were divided into three parts, each attempting to answer the three specific objectives outlined for the research. In answering the first objective that is to identify the peoples' perceptions of their commitment towards their religion and their willingness to learn other religions, it was found that generally more respondents perceived that they are religious. More than 91% of the Hindus perceived themselves as religious, followed by almost 60% Muslims and almost 56% Christians. Please refer to the following table (Table 2).

However when asked whether they possess vast knowledge of their religion, the Hindus again scored the highest percentage. But only 75% of them admitted that they really understand their religion, followed by almost 64% Muslims and about 53% Buddhist. At any rate, more respondents (that is almost 56%) considered themselves knowledgeable of their religion.

In general, majority of the respondents (i.e. about 62%) stated their willingness to learn other religions being practiced by the people of this country. Furthermore, more than 76% of the respondents agreed that it is important to understand other religions being practiced in the country (Please refer to statement 4 in the table). In addition, more than 87% of them admitted that understanding other religions will allow people to live harmoniously in this country. This openness marked an important development towards an open inter-religious information sharing.

Table 2: Peoples' perception towards religions.

Statements	Religion	Disagree (%)	Undecided (%)	Agree (%)	Total (%)
1. I think I'm a religious person.	Muslim (n=208)	6.7	34.6	58.7	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	33.3	32.0	34.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	13.9	30.6	55.6	100
	Hindu (n=24)	8.3	0.0	91.7	100
	Others (n=13)	69.2	7.7	23.1	100
	Total (N=356)	15.4	30.3	54.2	100
2. I have vast knowledge of my religion	Muslim (n=208)	8.7	27.4	63.9	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	22.7	45.3	32.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	2.8	44.4	52.8	100
	Hindu (n=24)	0.0	25.0	75.0	100
	Others (n=13)	38.5	30.8	30.8	100
	Total (N=356)	11.5	32.9	55.6	100
3. I'm interested to learn other religion being practiced in this country	Muslim (n=208)	13.9	25.5	60.6	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	18.7	25.3	56.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	11.1	16.7	72.2	100
	Hindu (n=24)	12.5	8.3	79.2	100
	Others (n=13)	23.1	15.4	61.5	100
	Total (N=356)	14.9	23.0	62.1	100
4. I think it is important for us to understand other religions that are being practiced in	Muslim (n=208)	8.2	17.3	74.5	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	8.0	17.3	74.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	5.6	13.9	80.6	100
	Hindu (n=24)	0.0	4.2	95.8	100
	Others (n=13)	30.8	0.0	69.2	100

this country.	Total (N=356)	8.1	15.4	76.4	100
5. Understanding other religion in this country will lead us to harmonious lives.	Muslim (n=208)	4.3	10.1	85.6	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	8.0	8.0	84.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	2.8	0.0	97.2	100
	Hindu (n=24)	0.0	0.0	100.0	100
	Others (n=13)	15.4	0.0	84.6	100
	Total (N=356)	5.1	7.6	87.4	100
6. As far as I know, my religion never urges me to make enemy with the people of other religion.	Muslim (n=208)	2.4	2.9	94.7	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	5.3	5.3	89.3	100
	Christian (n=36)	0.0	2.8	97.2	100
	Hindu (n=24)	0.0	8.3	91.7	100
	Others (n=13)	7.7	23.1	69.2	100
	Total (N=356)	2.8	4.5	92.7	100
7. As far as I know, religions of the people of this country have never lead to segregation in the community.	Muslim (n=208)	8.7	15.4	76.0	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	16.0	20.0	64.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	8.3	13.9	77.8	100
	Hindu (n=24)	8.3	4.2	87.5	100
	Others (n=13)	30.8	0.0	69.2	100
	Total (N=356)	11.0	14.9	74.2	100
8. Following the Sep. 11 attack on New York, I'm certain that inter-religious misunderstanding can lead to hatred towards particular religion.	Muslim (n=208)	3.8	14.9	81.3	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	14.7	17.3	68.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	11.1	16.7	72.2	100
	Hindu (n=24)	8.3	16.7	75.0	100
	Others (n=13)	7.7	7.7	84.6	100
	Total (N=356)	7.3	15.4	77.2	100
9. Religious fanaticism normally occurs among those who possess superficial knowledge of the religion.	Muslim (n=208)	6.7	20.2	73.1	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	16.0	29.3	54.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	8.3	30.6	61.1	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	12.5	83.3	100
	Others (n=13)	15.4	23.1	61.5	100
	Total (N=356)	9.0	22.8	68.3	100
10. A religious person normally respects other religions as well.	Muslim (n=208)	4.8	11.1	84.1	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	21.3	32.0	46.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	8.3	19.4	72.2	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	4.2	91.7	100
	Others (n=13)	7.7	38.5	53.8	100
	Total (N=356)	8.7	16.9	74.4	100
11. To me terrorism is not motivated by a religion.	Muslim (n=208)	1.9	3.8	94.2	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	6.7	5.3	88.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	8.3	16.7	75.0	100
	Hindu (n=24)	0.0	4.2	95.8	100
	Others (n=13)	0.0	0.0	100.0	100

	Total (N=356)	3.4	5.3	91.3	100
12. Terrorism such as the attack on New York should not be linked to any religion.	Muslim (n=208)	5.8	9.1	85.1	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	18.7	18.7	62.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	16.7	25.0	58.3	100
	Hindu (n=24)	12.5	41.7	45.8	100
	Others (n=13)	15.4	7.7	76.9	100
	Total (N=356)	10.4	14.9	74.7	100
13. Ignorance of other religions hinders integration of the people in this country.	Muslim (n=208)	7.2	12.5	80.3	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	8.0	30.7	61.3	100
	Christian (n=36)	8.3	19.4	72.2	100
	Hindu (n=24)	8.3	29.2	62.5	100
	Others (n=13)	15.4	7.7	76.9	100
	Total (n=356)	7.9	18.0	74.2	100

In responding to statement 6, almost 93% of the respondents agreed to the fact that their religions do not teach them to ignite conflict with the followers of other religions. Additionally, in referring to statement 7, about 74% of the respondents believed that religions in this country have never lead to segregation in the community. About 77% of them admitted that they were certain that inter-religious misunderstanding could lead to hatred. Eventually this could escalate conflict in the community.

Nevertheless, slightly more than 68% of the respondents agreed that religious fanaticism normally occurred among those who possess superficial knowledge of the religion (Please refer to statement 9). Furthermore, more than 74% of them agreed to the fact that a religious person normally respects other religions as well. About 91% of the respondents admitted that to them terrorism is not motivated by a religion and about 75% agreed that terrorism such as the attack on the World Trade Center should not be linked to any religion. These responses showed that the respondents were rational enough in perceiving their religions and religions followed by other people in the country. They were able to differentiate between religious faith and extremism that might be inspired by some other sentiments. To sum up this part, about 74% of the respondents agreed that ignorance of other religions could impede integration of the people in the country.

In answering the second objective of the study, that is to identify the sources of information regarding their religions, majority of the respondents (i.e. almost 79%) in general agree that they learn their religion from their immediate family members (Please refer to Table 3). About 53% disagreed with the statement that they learn their religion from their neighbors. However, a majority of them (i.e. 81%) admitted that reading is another source of their religious information.

Table 3: Source of religious information.

Statements.	Religion	Disagree (%)	Undecided (%)	Agree (%)	Total
1. I learn my religion from my immediate family.	Muslim (n=208)	6.7	6.3	87.0	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	29.3	8.0	62.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	5.6	13.9	80.6	100
	Hindu (n=24)	12.5	16.7	70.8	100
	Others (n=13)	46.2	0.0	53.8	100
	Total (N=356)		13.2	7.9	78.9
2. I learn my religion from my neighbors.	Muslim (n=208)	42.3	26.0	31.7	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	65.3	10.7	24.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	61.1	25.0	13.9	100
	Hindu (n=24)	70.8	16.7	12.5	100
	Others (n=13)	92.3	7.7	0.0	100
	Total (N=356)		52.8	21.3	25.8
3. I learn my religion through reading.	Muslim (n=208)	5.8	4.8	89.4	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	25.3	12.0	62.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	13.9	11.1	75.0	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	8.3	87.5	100
	Others (n=13)	30.8	15.4	53.8	100
	Total (N=356)		11.5	7.6	80.9
4. I came to know about other religions being practiced in this country from my friends.	Muslim (n=208)	11.1	19.7	69.2	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	14.7	14.7	70.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	16.7	19.4	63.9	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	12.5	83.3	100
	Others (n=13)	15.4	15.4	69.2	100
	Total (N=356)		12.1	18.0	69.9
5. I came to know about other religions being practiced in this country through reading.	Muslim (n=208)	13.5	12.5	74.0	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	21.3	16.0	62.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	5.6	19.4	75.0	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	20.8	75.0	100
	Others (n=13)	15.4	7.7	76.9	100
	Total (N=356)		13.8	14.3	71.9
6. I came to know about other religions being practiced in this country through radio programs.	Muslim (n=208)	42.8	34.1	23.1	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	50.7	36.0	13.3	100
	Christian (n=36)	58.3	22.2	19.4	100
	Hindu (n=24)	45.8	33.3	20.8	100
	Others (n=13)	84.6	7.7	7.7	100
	Total (N=356)		47.8	32.3	19.9
7. I came to know about other religions being practiced in this country through TV programs.	Muslim (n=208)	20.7	26.0	53.4	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	34.7	25.3	40.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	47.2	16.7	36.1	100
	Hindu (n=24)	33.3	20.8	45.8	100
	Others (n=13)	30.8	30.8	38.5	100
	Total (N=356)		27.5	24.7	47.8

How do the respondents learn about other religions that are being practiced in this country? Majority of them (i.e. almost 70%) stated that they obtained such information from their friends. About 72% of them obtained the information through reading. Thus, friends and reading materials are two most popular sources of information regarding religions practiced by others in the community. How about other media? Statement 6 and 7 in the table shows that only about half of the total respondents (i.e. 48%) indicated that they obtained information regarding other religions from TV programs and only 20% of them stated that they obtained such information from radio programs. This shows that radio and TV are two least popular sources of inter-religious information in the country.

In answering the third objective, which is to determine the roles of communication and media in disseminating inter-religious information in the country, majority of the respondents (i.e. 75%) agreed to the fact that information on all religions being practiced in the community must always be disseminated (Please refer to Table 4, Statement 1). Who should play this role? About 74% of the respondents agreed that the press should play an active role in this matter. However, slightly more than 65% of them stated that radio stations should play an active role and 73% agreed that TV stations should play an active role in disseminating such information. Thus, print and electronic media according to majority of the respondents should play a major role in inter-religious communication in this country.

Table 4: Roles of communication and media in inter-religion communication.

Statements.	Religion	Disagree (%)	Undecided (%)	Agree (%)	Total
1. For the sake of unity, information on all religions being practiced by the people of this country must always be disseminated.	Muslim (n=208)	10.6	21.2	68.3	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	9.3	6.7	84.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	5.6	8.3	86.1	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	8.3	87.5	100
	Others (n=13)	7.7	7.7	84.6	100
	Total (N=356)	9.3	15.4	75.3	100
2. The press should play an active role in disseminating information on various religions being practiced in this country.	Muslim (n=208)	10.1	17.8	72.1	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	10.7	16.0	73.3	100
	Christian (n=36)	5.6	19.4	75.0	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	20.8	75.0	100
	Others (n=13)	7.7	0.0	92.3	100
	Total (N=356)	9.3	17.1	73.6	100
3. Radio stations should play an active role in disseminating information on various religions being practiced in this country.	Muslim (n=208)	13.9	21.2	64.9	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	14.7	25.3	60.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	11.1	19.4	69.4	100
	Hindu (n=24)	8.3	20.8	70.8	100
	Others (n=13)	15.4	0.0	84.6	100
	Total (N=356)	13.5	21.1	65.4	100
4. TV stations should play an active role in disseminating information on various religions being practiced in this country.	Muslim (n=208)	11.5	15.4	73.1	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	13.3	18.7	68.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	5.6	19.4	75.0	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	16.7	79.2	100
	Others (n=13)	7.7	7.7	84.6	100

	Total (N=356)	10.7	16.3	73.0	100
5. The role played by main stream press in this country in disseminating inter-religion information is currently too small.	Muslim (n=208)	7.2	29.8	63.0	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	20.0	36.0	44.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	5.6	25.0	69.4	100
	Hindu (n=24)	0.0	25.0	75.0	100
	Others (n=13)	0.0	38.5	61.5	100
	Total (N=356)	9.0	30.6	60.4	100
6. The role played by radio stations in this country in disseminating inter-religion information is currently too small.	Muslim (n=208)	4.3	28.8	66.8	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	9.3	37.3	53.3	100
	Christian (n=36)	0.0	27.8	72.2	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	33.3	62.5	100
	Others (n=13)	0.0	23.1	76.9	100
	Total (N=356)	4.8	30.6	64.6	100
7. The role played by TV stations in this country in disseminating inter-religion information is currently too small.	Muslim (n=208)	8.7	28.8	62.5	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	17.3	42.7	40.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	5.6	30.6	63.9	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	41.7	54.2	100
	Others (n=13)	0.0	30.8	69.2	100
	Total (N=356)	9.6	32.9	57.6	100
8. Intellectual discourses such as seminars that involve various religions should be held frequently in this country in order to equip the people with inter-religious information.	Muslim (n=208)	2.9	16.8	80.3	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	4.0	22.7	73.3	100
	Christian (n=36)	2.8	19.4	77.8	100
	Hindu (n=24)	0.0	8.3	91.7	100
	Others (n=13)	0.0	7.7	92.3	100
	Total (N=356)	2.8	17.4	79.8	100
9. The leaders of this country should be more serious in promoting inter-religious integration.	Muslim (n=208)	1.0	2.4	96.6	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	5.3	4.0	90.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	0.0	5.6	94.4	100
	Hindu (n=24)	0.0	4.2	95.8	100
	Others (n=13)	0.0	0.0	100.0	100
	Total (N=356)	1.7	3.1	95.2	100
10. IT should be used in promoting inter-religious understanding in this country.	Muslim (n=208)	8.7	13.9	77.4	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	14.7	21.3	64.0	100
	Christian (n=36)	2.8	22.2	75.0	100
	Hindu (n=24)	8.3	16.7	75.0	100
	Others (n=13)	7.7	0.0	92.3	100
	Total (N=356)	9.3	16.0	74.7	100
11. Inter-religious tolerance could be achieved through inter-religious communication in this country.	Muslim (n=208)	1.0	8.7	90.4	100
	Buddhist (n=75)	2.7	18.7	78.7	100
	Christian (n=36)	2.8	5.6	91.7	100
	Hindu (n=24)	4.2	8.3	87.5	100
	Others (n=13)	7.7	7.7	84.6	100
	Total (N=356)	2.0	10.4	87.6	100

In referring to statement 5 of the table, about 60% of the respondents stated that the role being played by the main stream press in the country for the time being is too small as far as inter-religious information is concerned. About 65% of them stated that the role being played by radio stations is too small and about 58% of them agreed that the role being played by TV stations is too small in relation to the same matter. Thus, it can be concluded that the role being played by print and electronic media in promoting inter-religious understanding is still too small and far below the peoples' expectations. About 75% of the respondents suggested IT to be used in disseminating inter-religious information in this country (statement 10).

Statement 8 of the table shows that majority of the respondents chose face-to-face interaction as another method in inter-religious communication. Almost 80% of them suggested the used of intellectual discourses such as seminars and conferences that involve representatives from various faiths in providing information to the people. This will eventually equip the people with essential knowledge that will enable them to appreciate the differences between the religions and reducing prejudice amongst them. All in all, more than 95% of the respondents suggested the leaders of this country to be more serious in promoting inter-religious integration. And almost 88% of them agreed with the fact that inter-religious tolerance in this pluralistic society can be achieved through inter-religious communication.

The conclusion

This study reveals that Malaysians at large perceived themselves as religious. In general, more than half of those involved in this study considered themselves possessing vast knowledge of their own religion. Nevertheless, they are willing to learn other religions being practiced in this country since they believe that such understanding commands a mutual respect for one another. Consequently this will lead to a harmonious blend of people of different faith in the community. Understanding religions practiced by others will reduce misunderstanding, especially in a tough time such as post September 11 tragedy. Malaysians in general agree that such catastrophe should not be linked with any religion. Any form of terrorism is condemned without dragging sensitive sentiments such as race and religion into it that is capable of inciting hatred. Mutual respect and living in harmony could be achieved should we understand our differences and recognize the differences between one another. In order to understand each other, people need to share information amongst them. This is where communication plays an essential role.

As far as the source of religious information is concerned, Malaysians generally 'inherit' it from their close family members. This strengthens the fact that the people of this country are family oriented. The strong bond between family members somehow forms a strong hold to religious values and believes. Thus, it is almost certain in this country a Muslim comes from a Muslim family, a Christian comes from a Christian family and a Buddhist comes from a Buddhist family. Nevertheless, a study revealed that Hindus and Buddhist due to their open religious tradition are often exploited by the Christian missionaries. They are usually the first target of Christian propagation (Loganathan, 1984). Christianity or any other religions pose no threat to Muslims in Malaysia since proselytization to Muslims from non-Muslims are unconstitutional (Yousif, 1998). However another important source of religious information in the community is reading. Not only reading materials provide the people with information related to their own faith but also equip them with information on religions practiced by

others. Besides reading, Malaysians rely on friends to obtain information about other religions.

Unfortunately, hitherto in this multi-religious country the main stream print and electronic media has fail to play a leading role in disseminating inter-religious information to the public. Even though the masses are ready for such information, certain quarters especially the religious leaders are still skeptical. Probably some conservatives are fearful of being “infected” by other thoughts (The Star, Feb. 27, 2002). Even in some cases there are people who consider listening to discussions regarding other religions as a taboo. But it needs to be made clear that the information projected through the media is merely to make people understand what the religion is all about, not with the aim for proselytization. As far as propagating non-Islamic religion via the national media is concerned, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia states that it is permissible as long as it is not targeted at the Muslims (Yousif, 1998). Therefore it is clear that matters pertaining to the different faiths and religions can be disseminated through the main stream media and even by using ICT as long as they are informative and not for propagation purposes.

The openness of the people can be seen once again through this research when majority agrees to the need to hold more frequent inter-religious discourses. These discourses were almost a taboo prior to the tragic disaster in New York last year. Ironically after the attack people started to feel the need to understand each other and to discuss and debate things that differ them from the other, in a very open way. But again in a volatile situation like Malaysia, these discourses should be conducted with cautions and should focus at getting people to get together despite the differences rather than highlighting the differences that may cause discomfort. The former premier Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in an interview with the Far Eastern Economic Review in 1996 stated that,

“... multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual differences among Malaysians make open debate dangerous. The threat is from inside... So we’ve got to be armed so to speak. Not with guns but with the necessary laws to make sure the country remains stable”

And the first step towards realizing inter-religious tolerance should come from the leaders; political, religious or community leaders of the country. This involves the imams, swamis, priests, cabinet ministers, political party leaders and community leaders at all levels. They should show the people the right path to integration and religious tolerant. The differences in the peoples’ faiths are there and cannot be ignored. The government’s firm role in providing stability is commended, but their flexibility in accommodating diversity in the peoples’ beliefs is expected. Religious diversity in this country is actually an asset, not an encumbrance. In accommodating the diversity we need to be tolerance. Tolerance does not mean ignoring the differences but rather it is the willingness and readiness to accept the differences and acknowledge the rights of others to be different (Wilmot, 1997). People have been created to be different in terms of their races, cultures, languages and religions by the Almighty not for them to despise one another but rather for them to strive to know each other. In other word it is a challenge for them to communicate with each other.

“... Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.” (Al-Quran, 5:48).

“... Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.”

(The New Testament, Chapter 3, Colossians, 4:13)

Recommendations

This research is an attempt to explore the need for inter-religious communication in the wake of inter-religious conflicts due to global terrorism. Religion is extremely sentimental. A move by certain quarters to mask their actions in the name of faith and religion tends to be very influential and very often gain mass support from the people. The world has seen damages, catastrophes and lost of lives caused by such actions in Ireland, Sri Lanka, Spain, Texas, Tokyo, New York and Gujarat (India) to name a few. The list will continue unless the people come to an agreement that they need to be different and accepted the need to acknowledge the differences. Hence, inter-religious communication is the only answer in bringing the people together, what more in a pluralistic society like Malaysia. The aggression against the other party has surpassed racial issues in some countries. Hundreds perished and thousands were made homeless in Ambon, Indonesia not long ago. The clash was not between different races but between Indonesians of different religion. They shared a common culture, came from one root and spoke a same language. The only difference between them is their faith. Not long after Ambon, more than 600 lives perished in Gujarat, India. Again, it was not a racial confrontation but a conflict between Indians of different faith (The Star, March 10, 2002). Therefore, what is needed hitherto is more than inter-racial understanding. What the world need now is an effort to understand and appreciate the different beliefs that people have and to be sensitive to such beliefs. What the world need now is inter-religious communication. Since this is an exploratory study, further study is required in a bigger scale in order to be able to explain the phenomenon in a more holistic picture.

References

- _____. "PM: No ban on inter-faith dialogues". *The Malaysian Bar*, Thursday, September 14, 2006. <http://www.malaysianbar.org.my>
- _____. "Muslims try to get Message Across". *Sunday Star*, Jan 27, 2002. Kuala Lumpur, The Star Publications (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd., 2002.
- _____. "Prayers for World Peace". *The New Straits Times*, Jan 26, 2002. Kuala Lumpur, The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd., 2002.
- _____. "Dr. M: Setting up Inter-faith Association will take time". *The Star*, Feb 27, 2002. Kuala Lumpur, The Star Publications (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd., 2002.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. *General Report of the Population Census*. Kuala Lumpur, Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2006.
- _____. *The Federal Constitution of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur, the Government of Malaysia, 1998.
- Yousif, Ahmad F. *Religious Freedom, Minorities and Islam*. Selangor, Malaysia, Thinkers Library, 1998.
- Ibrahim, Anwar. *The Asian Renaissance*. Singapore, Times Books International, 1996.
- Loganathan, K. "Problems that Hinder Inter-Religious Understanding : A Hindu Perspective", in *Contemporary Issues on Malaysian Religions*. Tunku Abdul Rahman, Dr Tan Chee Khoo, Chandra Muzaffar and Lim Kit Siang, eds. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, Pelanduk Publications, 1984.
- _____. "Dialogue Session with Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister". *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Oct. 24, 1996. Hong Kong, Review Publishing Company Limited, 1996.
- Wilmot, Fadlullah. "Problems that Hinder Inter-Religious Understanding : An Islamic Perspective", in *Contemporary Issues on Malaysian Religions*. Tunku Abdul Rahman, Dr Tan Chee Khoo, Chandra Muzaffar and Lim Kit Siang, eds. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, Pelanduk Publications, 1984.
- The Meaning of Glorious Koran, trans. by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall. New York, The New American Library.
- The Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments. Ramboro, London, 1994.