The Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Societal Development: Malaysian Experience

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Abstract

The role of interfaith dialogue is evident in societal development in Malaysia, where it was able to integrate and unify its plural society. This work wishes to examine the functions of interfaith dialogue in social development in Malaysia, with its background of having various religion, races and customs. It will look at the aspect of integration and unity, forms through the implementation of dialogue in the aspects of development, including aspects of religion. This paper will also give due focus to the Islamic perspectives of interfaith major concepts, developmental aspects (1Malaysia policy), dialogue interconnection with in-country development policy, as well as some current and related issues.

Keywords Interfaith Dialogue ; Muslim ; Non-Muslim Relation ; Malaysian Society

1. Introduction

It is a well-established fact to many that Malaysia is one multi-ethnic country, and it is only understood that every race must have its own interest. Therefore, cooperation from these diverse groups is crucial. The authors view dialogue as an instrument for communication and a vehicle for the smooth running of the process of development. However, the authors are well aware of the difficulty in objectively assessing the role played by inter-faith dialogues in the community development in this country. This is reasoned by the scarcity of specific and more detailed studies regarding this issue. Therefore, in this paperwork, the author will shed light on the role of inter-faith dialogues in the process of developing the community in Malaysia in general, as well as looking at some related aspects.

2. Interfaith Dialogue: Conceptual and Elaboration

Something that requires due attention when trying to comprehend inter-faith dialogues is the approaches adopted, namely theoretical and practical approaches. This is because, one's understanding from the theoretical standpoint may not be sufficient and one possibility is that it does not reflect the reality of its implementation.

In the Encyclopedia of Religion, an inter-faith dialogue is interpreted as, "conversation [dialogue] about the meaning of beliefs, ritual and ethic…" (Eliade 1987:344), whereas in The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, it is presented as " a process of interreligious understanding that demands mutual respect and the requirement that a description of another's religion be affirmed by the member of that religion" (Smith 1996:317). Another definition would be that dialogues held among religions, involve discussions on religious beliefs and their practices which is the framework in every discussion, as well as those connected with issues of culture and ethnic or the race of various religion (Sutcliffe 1984: 112).

With the above definitions, the inter-faith dialogue has been based on several fundamental principles applicable to every race such as the issues of theology, doctrines, dogmas, rites and rituals.

In detailing a more practical understanding, the authors will employ several approaches concerning terminology application. The aim is to have a clearer understanding of every explanation given in relation of its application.

In relation with its application, the authors are inclined to look at dialogue from the Islamic perspective, therefore making use of the textual approach of the Holy Book, the Qur'ān itself. Apart from that, some closer examination will also be performed on the classical or contemporary writings including ideas from various Muslims intellects, whether they are from the Malay Archipelago or Malaysia, having been directly involved in inter-faith dialogue.

Al-Qur'ān, in essence, has not provided detailed explanation on what is termed 'inter-faith dialogue'. Yet, some verses in the Holy Qur'an have shed light on religious relations and encouragements, particularly towards *ahli al-Dhimmi* seen here as very relevant to the process of understanding the inter-faith dialoguei.

3. The Term Dialogue In Al-Qur'ān

The authors will make reference of some verses of Al-Qur'ān from several sūrah (chapters), (1) Sūrah al-Nahl (16): 125, (2) Sūrah al-'Ankabūt (29): 46, (3) Sūrah al-Kahfi (18): 34 and 37, (4) Sūrah al-Mujādalah (58): 1, (5) Sūrah al-Anfāl (8): 6 and (6) Sūrah al-Hajj (22): 8.

Al-Qur'ān uses two different words in highlighting the issue of the dialogue. Firstly, the word stemming from *"hiwār",* whereas the second is the word *"jidal"*. Both carry the interpretation of a dialogue, although the connotations may be positive or negative.(Q-16:125 and 29:46)

In Sūrah al-Nahl verse 125 it is clearly stated that the word used in labeling the word 'dialogue' is the word *"jidal"*. According to Ibn Kathīr the word *"jidal"* referred in this verse carries

a positive, healthy interpretation. It is also referred as the main principle in teaching approaches *(da'wah)*, where the word *"jidal"* is accompanied by the saying *"billati hiya ahsan"* (in a good manner) (Ibn Kathīr 2000:367-368). At this juncture, the authors do not only see the Qur'an as explaining the interpretation and the best way to implement dialogues, but also elucidating the difference from the application of negative, condemned "*jidal*".

Therefore, positive dialogues should not carry elements of humiliation, disparagement, overbearing ego, severe criticism and cynicism that will reduce the confidence and belief of the listeners especially with regards to dialogues done for the purpose of propagating the belief of Islam (Siddiq Fadhil 2003:54). A well-delivered application of dialogues will highlight the aim of the dialogue, not to prove any kind of victory but more towards testifying truth (Siddiq Fadhil 2003:54).

Whereas in Sūrah al-Kahfi the word 'dialogue' is repeated twice in verse 34 and 37. (Q – 18:34-37) Allah said:

Both verses have made use of the word *"hiwār"* in terming the word 'dialogue'. According to Ibn Kathīr, the word 'dialogue' shown in these two verses carries a negative connotation which are 'to debate him'*,* 'oppose him', 'boastfully undermine him' (Ibn Kathir 2000:11). Nevertheless, a rather contrasting interpretation is explained by Ṭabarī in defining the word 'dialogue' to both the verses. He has the tendency to define the dialogue in a positive note which indicates 'they take and give in the course of speech' (Al- Ṭabarī 1997: 161-164).

Next, in Sūrah al-Mujādalah verse 1(Q- 58:1), the same term is used in a positive light that is 'a calm dialogue' *(al-hiwār al-hadi)* (Ibn Kathīr 1983: 318) that is to look for, as well as to provide evidence, of a truth.

Next, the word 'dialogue' is also interpreted as deliberately disputing a truth by supplying various 'cooked-up' excuses given by the infidels which is termed as *"jidal"*. Therefore, in this context, it is seen as an approach that renders a negative dialogue.(Q – 22: 8 and 8:6).

Ibn Kathīr, in his interpretation of verse 8 from Sūrah al-Hajj has stated that the dialogue being applied is one "that is not based on clear logic" *(bilā 'aql ṣaḥīh),* and "without having clear and accurate resources" *(lā naqala ṣaḥīh ṣarīh),* and its approach is said to be conducted on lusts, *sans* rational thinking (Ibn Kathir 1983:318). Meanwhile, the same elaboration is stated by Ibn Kathīr in interpreting Sūrah al-Anfāl verse 6 which is the dialogue approach of deliberately disputing a truth with the use of various embellished excuses (Ibn Kathir 1983:318).

Having examined the Quranic verses above, the authors have found that the term 'dialogue' is divided into two, having the positive and negative perspectives with their own exclusive attributes. In reality, the differences that exist are seen through the contexts where the word 'dialogue' is applied and used in the sentence, also suitable with the situation and phenomenon of its usage.

From the authors' points of view, based on the verses previously mentioned, the approach of religious activities like dialogue, religious studies in the academic context (Comparative religion and ethnic studies), must be constructed and developed on the concept of religious obedience (*'ibadah)*. It should also be seen as a continuation from the preaching of Islam, an agenda initiated by our Prophet Muhammad SAW. In the same respect, the emphasis on the concept of justice, peace and respecting the freedom of religion as mentioned in the Qur'an (Surah al-Baqarah (2): 256) cannot be taken lightly.

We also cannot simply abandon the viewpoints of Islamic prominent figures about this heated debate. One of the Islamic renowned scholars who are directly involved in studying the religions of the world is Abū Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad Al-Bīrūnī (973 C.E -1051 C.E).ii In the process of examining the religions from the angle of belief or practice, he has constructed a rather objective, unbiased principle. In his work *Kitāb al-Hindiii*, he has mildly elaborated on the comprehension regarding the inter-faith dialogue, as he writes, *"We think now that what we have related in this book*

will be sufficient for anyone who wants to converse [dialogue] with the Hindus, and to discuss with them question of religion, science or literature, on the very basis of their own civilization".iv

In the authors' opinion, the idea or framework for understanding inter-faith dialogue was basically formulated and understood by Al-Bīrūnī. Although such dialogue was still non-existent at the time, he had made way for later scholars in recognising the importance of having dialogues of civilisation (Chandra Muzaffar 2003:61) and further, inter-faith dialogues.

Another great Muslim personality in the field of comparative religion is Abū Muhammad 'Alī ibn Ahmad ibn Sa'īd ibn Hazm (994 C.E-1064 C.E), better known as Ibn Hazm. Ghulam Haider Aasi (1999:86) in his work *Muslim Understanding of Other Religion: A Study Of Ibn Hazm's Kitāb al-Faşl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Nihal,* has explained that methodology employed by Ibn Hazm in his examination and understanding of other religions is called as the *dialectical-dialogical method.v*

Although this prominent scholar had not detailed how the actual understanding of the inter-faith dialogue's implementation should be developed, with the methodology given, the authors are able to make basic conclusion that, dialogue should involve all the aspects connected with religion namely aspects of theology, doctrine, practices, culture, historical background and matters involving the comprehension towards the Holy Qur'an. Other than that, dialogue participation must also be free and unbiased, also requires conversion to the truth and expanded to generating the element of appreciating the tradition and culture of a religion (Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman 1996: 77).

Hasan Askarivi, in summarizing his understanding towards the implementation of the inter-faith dialogue especially the Christian-Islam dialogue, has asserted:

"Dialogue is an attempt on the part of a few individuals, primarily initiated by few Christian organizations, to bring people of various backgrounds together. This is taken the form of local meeting and international gatherings. It occurs when people who function autonomously come together. And, in the very act of their coming together and listening to one another, they surrender part of their autonomy. As soon as two distinct person come together, a relationship is apprehended. That relationship, now, has got a three-fold characteristic: mutuality, conflict and self transcendence. One and three are complementary. On a spiritual level, there is a lot that is unknown. The outcome is totally unpredictable. If you predict the outcome of dialogue, it is not dialogue; it is a command, an imperative, a kind of strategy. If you can approach the dialogue with and openness, you should be ready to hear the word of God from a Muslim, for instance" (Kimball 1987: 237-238).

On the other hand, the understanding put forward by John Alembillah Azumah (2001:171-172) has placed great concern on the ethics manifested in the implementation of a dialogue. He states that a dialogue is awareness in a relationship that involves exchanges of views, ideas of parallel or varying stance, or even varying between individuals or communities. The main goal is to prevent prejudice, obsession, leaning more profoundly towards valuing the differences and similarities among different parties. Therefore, by principle, the utmost priority is developing mutual trusts along with forming peaceful and harmonious relationships (John Alembillah Azumah 2001:172).

Syed Z. Adedin *et.al* (2000) in his writing entitled "Race of Reverence and The Improvement of Mutual Trust" has provided an understanding of a more practical dialogue, where he notes:

"[Dialogue is] a process where people from various religious backgrounds gather and acknowledge the pious identity and integrity of one another, holding hands in similarities and respect, to disregard the threat that has formed a barrier to us all"

Next, he opines that the inter-faith dialogue should exceed the discussions which highlight on the theological, doctrinal and ritual aspects as the differences have been somewhat apparent. A good approach, for him would be the discussion on social, economic and political issues that can become a collective focus, thus enabling the trust among religions involved, also driving continuous interactions in different issues (Syed Z. Abedin *et.al* 2000:66).

The concept and understanding of the inter-faith dialogue presented by Kamar Oniah Kamaruzamanvii, from the viewpoint of the author, have their own appeal, are practical and adaptable to the context of multiple communities in Malaysia and can also be deemed conclusive to the actual understanding of the inter-faith dialogue that should have taken place. She further states that dialogue not only discusses questions of theology and doctrine, but should also serve as an arena for one to get better acquainted with the religion, as well as serving as an arena for the seeking of knowledge. Other purposes are to develop close relationships and strengthen the feelings and sentiments of respect to othersviii.

A dialogue, for her, may also function as an arena to chart out common plans and initiate actions for the common good of all. One example here is the issues of humanity which can be materialized in the form of collective action such as community activities. Bearing this in mind, she is very much interested if the activity of inter-faith dialogue is formed on two platforms, namely (1) Dialogue on Religions and (2) Dialogue on Inter-Religious Co-operation.

4. Interfaith Dialogue In Malaysia: Historical Context

Due to the rather lengthy accounts of the dialogue's historical aspect, the authors will only bring up some related issues, with the intention of explaining the function played by the dialogue in issues involving the non-Muslims' interests.

The main factor which propels the implementation of the inter-faith dialogue is the discontentment of the non-Muslim communities towards the implementation of the Islamisation Policy by the government in 1982 (Khairulnizam Mat Karim & Suzy Aziziyana Saili 2009:55). This policy covers aspects of politics, economy, education, legislation and the socio-culture of the Malaysian community. They have this assumption that with the realisation of this policy, their lives will not be guaranteed although the country in which they live has been practising the freedom of religion as enshrined in Article 11 and 12 of the Malaysian Constitution (Khairulnizam Mat Karim & Suzy Aziziyana Saili 2009:55).

Among the Christian leaders that has strongly criticised this policy is Reverend Paul Tanix. He states that the Islamisation not only instills Islamic values into the government's administration but indirectly makes its way into the individuals of the government servants whether they are Muslims or not. Hence, the insertation of Islamic principles in every angle of the ways of life of the multi-religious, racial and cultural Malaysians is imminent.

Regarding the Islamic values he has also questioned the sincerity of the government in implementing the policy, when it attempts to make the non-Muslims understand that *"Islamic Values"* are synonym with *"Universal Values"*. Therefore, he goes on to add that if the government really means *"Islamic Values"* as *"Universal Values"*, why has the government not started with the term Universal Values in the first place, when the Malaysian government is for all, and not solely for Malay-Muslims. The same opinion has also been offered by Reverend Dr. Batumalai in the terminology and application of these Islamic valuesx.

Meanwhile, Lim Kit Siang in a press conference, in his reaction towards the proposal of Malaysia as an Islamic country and the implementation of the Hudud Law, has affirmed that:

"Every time someone propose an Islamic State or the introduction of hukum hudud with the Islamic penalties of limbs-chopping, whipping and stone-throwing for all Malaysians, such person must be forcefully remined that such a proposal is not only unconstitutional but completely unacceptable to the majority of the Malaysian people... The greatest danger and problem facing Malaysians is not the issue of Islamic State, but the introduction of Islamisation measures in the various state in the past years which were highly detrimental to the right and interest of non-Muslim, as the various Islamic Law Administration enactment and other state legislations in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Johore and Terengganu which do not have PAS Government"xi

5. The Arising Issues

At the initial stage, most of the Malaysians, in particular the non-Malays-non-Muslims were not comfortable and were afraid with the wave of Islamic Resurgence. Such was the sentiment at the time that, some of them had held the opinion that with the implementation of the Policy, they would be downgraded to a second class community, when they had made reference to every implementation of the policy in various fields. In this section, the authors will examine a few effects resulting from the implementation of Islamisation Policy towards the non-Muslims social lives.

(a) The Sharī 'ah Implementation

With Malaysia being proposed as an Islamic Country and the suggestion to implement the Shari'ah Law, most of the non-Muslim population had demonstrated their discontentment. Some of their excuses leaned on the fact that it was impossible for the Shari'a to give total freedom to other religions, as well as the fact that the justice of such implementation was questionable. As an example, many of the non-Malays-non Muslims were fearful of the punishment imposed to the criminals with reference to the Hudud implementation in Kelantan led by the PASxii government particularly after they won the 8th general election. Other than that, they had also mentioned about the Shariah Enactment that was made effective in a few states especially in Selangor in 1989 in Articles 67 and 70 of the Islamic Law Enactment referring to the issue of religious conversion amongst children under the age of pubertyxiii.

(b) The use of 'al-Kitab' to replace the Bible

After the government, especially the Home Minister had made stringent legalisation of issues that may affect national peace and stability; the government had announced that all religious books including the Bible imported from foreign countries need to undergo prior endorsement by the Home Minister (KDN) (New Straits Time, 1 December 1984). Other than that, the government also prohibited any effort to translate the Bible as al-Kitab (Holy Book). The Christian community was also dissatisfied with the prohibited use of 'Arabic / Qur'ānic terms like "Allah, Firman, Rasūl, Sharī'ah, Imān, Ka'abah, Injil, Baitullah, Wahyu, Nabi, Syukūr, Zikir and Doa". They questioned the relevancy of this prohibition stating that the Christian followers in countries like Egypt are free to use the terms in their national language, quite unlike in Malaysia (Ghazali Basri 1999:52).

(c) The Allocation for Place of Worship

In this issue, the Christian followers in particular had highlighted the injustice of the government in the context of freedom of religion in Malaysia. Basically, they had demanded that their houses of worship were added following the capacity of the people in a location. At the time, the ratio of houses of worship to the people was 1:4000 and this is seen as a form of discrimination to the adherents of other religions in performing their religious duties (Ghazali Basri 1999: 52). Such case still prevails as in the issue of the Hindu Temple constructions in Shah Alam and Ampang.

(d) Broadcasting allocation

The allocation of half-hour broadcast in the electronic media- TV 1, TV 2, and the radio granted by the government during Christmas, Deepavali and Wesak is rendered absurd, if compared with Islamic programmes aired on both Television and Radio. They opine that this is also another element of religious discrimination, which falls in disagreement with the Federal Constitution provision on freedom of religion. Here, they have forwarded various protestations organized in memorandum, seminars, and symposium and also in printed materials (Ghazali Basri 1999:52)

(e) The Government Education Policyxiv

The implementation of Primary School New Curriculum (KBSR) in 1983 and the Secondary Schools' Integrated Curriculum (KBSM) in 1989 had more or less become the testimonials of the inculcation of Islamic values. Thus, the followers of other religions, in particular the Christians were

not happy with the policy. This is due to the fact that with the new set of policies, an impact is seen in the numbers of missionary education institutions like the Catholic and Methodist schools (Ghazali Basri 1999:53). Therefore, they had established the National Catholic Education Council (NCEC) in 1986. The reason for the establishment of this council was to reinstate the strength of Christian education amongst the children (Ghazali Basri 1999:53). Whereas at the level of the higher education centers, the introduction of a new subject Islamic Civilization had also been the subject of criticism (M. Bakri Musa 1999:68.) They had questioned why the non-Muslims had to learn Islam while their Muslim counterparts did not have to learn other existing world civilizations. Finally, the subject was changed to Islamic and Asian Civilizations (TITAS).

6. Government's Resolving Action (Beginning of Interfaith Dialogue)

In reality, the government had initiated some measures as to explain the implications of the policy to the whole community, especially the non-Muslims. These measures were understandably, to eliminate any misunderstanding and misinterpretation that might arise towards the government and Islam in particular. Some of the statements made are quoted below:

"Islamisation process should be seen from the Malaysian context. Although it is more on the reaffirmation of faith and the reaffirmation that the Islamic religious and moral values are comprehensive, measures are being taken for national development, politics and administration, but in so doing we must acknowledge the Malaysian reality of multi-religious, multi-racial society. Therefore Malaysian Islamisation process must taken into consideration the views of both Muslims and the non-Muslim. If Islamisation should bring about action which should be reflected in the development of the nation, then it is imperative that this Islamisation should be shared by all the various religious groups in the country..., Thus, I urge all of you to work for the betterment and strong society based on good values such as upholding higher morality standards, eradication of poverty and corruption. When we talk about "Universal Values" why label them "Islamic"? as these values that are good for mankind...Islamisation will not compromise with any form of narrow religious fanaticism and chauvism such as over politicising of Islam by some quarter of Muslim populace, I urge you to play your role to check such trend before taking it root"xv

"On behalf of my ministry, I would like to clarify the meaning of Islamic Values. Since we achieved independence in 1957, Islam was declared the official religion of the country, but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation. This provision has caused the Government to reject any form of political pressure from certain quarters to impose Islamic Laws on non-Muslim. If Muslim wants Islamic Laws to be imposed on their own society, it is their prerogative to do so. However, the Government of Malaysia has no wish to impose Islamic Law on non-Muslim. Islamic Values however are different from Islamic Values and Laws. In actual fact, Islamic Values are similar to the concept of Universal Values of good and evil. What are regarded as good in Islam too. This means that absorption of Islamic Values will not destroy other values in Malaysia".xvi

However, the followers of other religions especially their leaders and organisations were still unconvinced that the policies implemented would not be detrimental to their well-being. Therefore, in the next elaboration, the authors will further examine their reactions which surface as protests towards the implementation of the Islamisation policy by the government.

1. Action Of Resolutions (Demand) By The Non-Muslim(Invitation To Interfaith Dialogue)

According to Khairulnizam and Suzy Aziziyana (2009), several acts of resolutions which refer to the demands made by the non-Muslims, have opened the door for a dialogue initiation. Directly and indirectly, both parties (Muslims and non-Muslims) are able to interact in a platform of good office.

2. **The Establishment of the Malaysian Religious Consultative Council**.

With the awareness that Article 3 and 11 of the Federal Constitution might not be able to guarantee their well-being, in 1983 the non-Muslim leaders had agreed to form a council known as the *Malaysian Consultative For Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS)* (Chew M 2000:51). It is also known as the Malaysian Religious Consultative Council. The main aim of this establishment is to provide a front of *modus Vivendi*xvii in order for any demand to be able to be brought forward to relevant authorities more effectively. (Ghazali Basri 1999:15).

It has been rather apparent that the Christians were the most outspoken followers in projecting their dissatisfaction towards the new measures introduced by the government. (Ghazali Basri 1999:15) that they were seen as threat which can hamper their comfort and well-being. This can be seen in their domination in the council, where the president and the vice were Christian representatives. Other than that, they were also regretful and had questioned that no Muslim representative had joined this council. (Ghazali Basri 1999:15). Other than *MCCBCHS,* the Christians had also managed to establish the Christian Federation of Malaysia in 1985 and were also successfully registered as a valid organisation in the following year. The council was formed with the awareness to unite Christian followers where all in all, it had around 40 sects of the largest church in Malaysia. (Ghazali Basri 1999:15). This council is joined by three other Christian bodies which represent 90 percent of the Christian community namely the Catholic Church in Malaysia, The Council of Church in Malaysia and The National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (Christian Federation of Malaysia 1992:3). Among the aims of the council were to serve as a platform for the Christian community to voice out protests or proposals and recommendations through dialogue and discussion about various issues especially pertinent to the aspect of freedom of religion (Christian Federation of Malaysia 1992:3).

If reference is to be made on the historical facts mentions above, the findings suggest that the earliest inter-faith dialogue had been conducted between only two parties, which was the government, comprised majority of Muslims. Meanwhile, the dialogue's focus and reality was more towards the process of (1) discussion and explanation between the government and the non-Muslims towards the implementation of the Islamisation Policy and (2) voicing out the discontentment and demands of the non-Muslim community towards several main issues seen to threaten their social lives after the policy was implemented. In the authors' observation, the contemporary inter-faith dialogues held tend to have different focus and issues. The dialogues are not only playing the part of bringing up the rights of the non-Muslim community, but also discussing the entire aspect of living which involves community and national development for collective benefit, irrespective of the religion of the community.

As an example, if dialogue does not come into play in history, the Malaysian community may not be able to experience development in the economic aspect such as the Islamic Banking, Islamic Finance, Islamic Insurance in which its services is used by not only the Muslims, but also the non-Muslim counterparts. The issue of development in education, for example, saw the emergence of subjects like TITAS and Inter-Ethnic Relations to ascertain that both Muslim and non-Muslim communities understand civilisation and the other cultures. Dialogues did not only engage two parties but also bringing in various parties like government agencies, non-governmental bodies (religious and non-religious ones), Legislative bodies (non-religious) and academic groups.

Meanwhile, if reference is due to previous studies (done from 1995-2003), (Khairulnizam Mat Karim & Suzy Aziziyana Saili 2008:159-169) dialogue activities had engaged on issues connected to community building in Malaysia. Such activities deal with (1) The aspect of religion and current advancement, (2) Issues of Relationships of Religion and Race such as the issues of unity, integrity, affiliation, understanding, conflict and conflict management, 3) Universal issues akin to peace,

humanity and justice (4) Gender issues like gender socialisation, (5) Youth issues akin to youth socialisation. (6) Cultural aspects like arts and (7) Educational issues especially in the context of achieving unity in a community of diverse religions and races.

3. Dialogue and 1Malaysian Proposal

As the proposal of 1Malaysia is closely associated with the development of the country as a whole, it is perhaps important that its relation with dialogue is mentioned. The sixth Prime Minister Dato' Sri Mohd Najib bin Tun Abd Razak states that *"1Malaysia is a proposal to inculcate unity amongst fellow Malaysians who are multi-racial, which centralises on several important values that should become the practice of every Malaysian"* (www.1Malaysia.com.my). It also serves to compliment previous policies to strengthen unity towards achieving progress and development for all Malaysian citizens particularly and Malaysia, in general. (www.1Malaysia.com.my).

The proposal of 1Malaysia contains 2 main aspects namely (1) the inculcation of Core of Unity and (2) The Inculcation of Values of Aspiration. Among the characteristics of the former are: (a) Acceptance - every race should accept the uniqueness of other races in the capacity of mutual respect (b) Principles of Citizenship - every race must understand and feel the compassion for (i) Federal Constitution, (ii) The National Pillars of Principles. (c) Social justice - the implementation of justice for every race. These are also supported by some good values (a) mutual respect, being humble *(tawaddhu')*, living moderately and having courtesy.

If one is to dwell into this more deeply, he or she is going to note some similarities of the proposal with a few basics of inter-faith dialogues. Among the similarities are (1) the inter-faith dialogue must be done with the sincerity of the intention), (2) mutual respect*, (*3) equity and justice, (4) repudiation of fanaticism and (5) repudiation of elements of prejudice.xviii

Thus, the authors have this assumption that in ensuring the success of 1Malaysia in a pluralistic Malaysia, inter-faith dialogue must be seriously put into practice so as to instill firm and accurate understanding towards a particular religion / race / nation. This is to prevent misunderstanding, misinterpretation, inaccuracy of facts especially when there emerge some conflicts of interest that involve religious issues. For instance, issues of freedom of religion, the implementation of *hudūd* law, religious conversion and issues related to policy implementation and the government's new planning which deals directly or indirectly with a religion.

4. Dialogue and The National Development Policy (9th Malaysian Plan)

The general survey is done to look at the existing elements of dialogue and the more practical role that has been and will be, played in the multi-racial community building in Malaysia.

The aim of the National Development Policy according to the 9th Malaysia Plan is to reach a more sturdy level of economy with higher added values, other than concentrating on socio-economic issues, thus enhancing the quality of life of the people as a whole (Economic Planning Unit 2006). To achieve the aim, 5 principles have been outlined: (1) Improving the economy in a higher chain of values 2) Improving the capacity of knowledge and national innovation also instilling the "first-class minds". (3) Consistently handling the problem of inequality of socio-economy in a positive and proactive manner. (4) Improving the affordability of life quality and (5) strengthening the capacity of institutions and the implementation (Economic Planning Unit 2006: x-xi).

In the second principle contains in chapter 15, a section is dedicated to discuss the process of empowering community building. The aim is very clear which is to increase the development of the community and national unity. This was stated in:

Section 15.44 *"Community development programmes with the objective of inculcating positive values, fostering neighbourliness and harmonious living among the various communities as well as inculcating the spirit of self-reliance will continue to be implemented in the urban and rural areas. In the rural areas, non-formal education which*

includes family development classes on food and nutrition, family health and hygiene as well as home economics will be continued to further improve the quality of life of the rural community. The construction of new resource centres and community service centres will provide more opportunities for the rural families to be involved in community development programmes. (Economic Planning Unit 2006:337).

Section 15.46 "*To further promote and strengthen inter-racial cooperation and understanding among communities, profiles of residents within the particular housing area will be developed to ensure a more systematic approach towards the planning of activities and the initiation of efforts towards community development. Training in various areas such as conflict management and counseling will be conducted to enable members to handle challenges that they face in dealing with the community. The spirit of gotong-royong and the sense of commitment to achieve unity in a diverse and multi cultural society will be inculcated among members of the community through various programmes. Income generating activities will be encouraged among members aimed at improving their economic well-being. More pre-school unity classes will be established during the Plan period to inculcate mutual respect, greater understanding and love for the country among the young*". (Economic Planning Unit 2006:337)

Section 15.47, "*Various unity programmes that encourage the involvement of people from different races will be continued to enable all level of societies to interact and better understand each other. This will include cultural activities at the federal and state levels and the celebration of festivals belonging to the various races in the country. Efforts will continue to be undertaken to educate and create awareness among the various communities that unity is an important and paramount agenda in all aspects of life and it needs to be practised, internalised and strengthened from time to time. In this regard, the role of the media will be greatly emphasised.* (Economic Planning Unit 2006:337-338).

As previously mentions, there have been some processes or dialogue activities/ interactions and even methodologies or approaches that have been mapped out in the future planning of this country. The authors are able to make early conclusions that theoretically and generally, this is at par with the conceptual elaboration of a dialogue by Dr. Kamar Oniah which is from the context of *Dialogue Inter-Religious Co-operation*. It also demonstrates the role played in the nation building in Malaysia. Some identified planning or activities are: (1) The neighbourhood living programme, (2) The programme of conflict management training (racial conflict) and counseling, (3) Spring-cleaning activity, (4) The establishment of pre-school integrity programme, (5) Programmes of inter-racial interactions and (6) The programme of getting to know the culture of other races.

In the Malaysian context, there have been great deals of theories or ideas mentioned by researchers of ethnic relations as well as the inter-faith and civilisation dialogues. As an example, they have proposed that the dialogue's category and interactions be based on the people centralling on the comprehension towards dialogue basic concept previously elaborated; being ethical and high level of tolerance would be a few examples. Among the categories which are deemed suitable to the Malaysian context are (1) Daily dialogues and (2) Social dialogues (Khadijah Mohd. Khambali & Khairulnizam Mat Karim 2004: 20-21) where dialogue can play its part in forming the integration and unity as well as facilitating the process of developing the community and the country.

Daily dialogues: the ones held in everyday situations among various ethnic groups. These dialogues take place indirectly while interacting, communicating in the neighbourhood, at the workplace, shops or commercial places (transactions) without the need for discussion or formal events, but the mediums of religious values prevailing everyday would suffice (Khadijah Mohd Khambali & Khairulnizam Mat Karim 2004:21).

Social dialogues: these dialogues are held more towards cooperation in the planning or implementation of any activity. Examples of social projects: the development of the poor, the improvement of familial quality, the curbing of teenagers' misbehaviour and social-ills and humanity aids. The implementation does not highlight the status of religion but its main focus lies on collective good and benefit.

5. Conclusion

The development of a community is one process that is continuous and happens in stages. The authors cannot be more honest to say that community building requires a specific and detailed research as to look at the role of the inter-faith dialogue in the process of developing the community in Malaysia. This is especially to the government policies and how they are being implemented. The issues presented here are connected with the authors' own experiences and observations which become the very basis of the current study.

However, with the substances of the presentation, the authors see that the role played by such dialogue is great and pivotal especially as (1) the platform to instill mutual understanding (2) mutual correspondence, (3) a way to instill cooperation in general affairs (4) to encourage unity and integration, (5) breaking the distrust of one another and (6) a way to form harmony. With dialogue, all conflicts and misunderstanding among the religions will be resolved and this will further ease the unity process and nation's development. In theory and practice, if unity did not come about, especially in the country where the races are diversified, the development would be next to impossible.

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i Among the verses selected: Sūrah an-Nahl (16) :125, Sūrah al-'Ankabūt (29):26, Sūrah al-Hajj (22):8, Sūrah al-Anfāl (8):6, Sūrah al-Fath (48):13, Sūrah Yūnus (10):99, Sūrah al-Mā`idah (5):48, Sūrah al-'An 'ām (6): 108, Sūrah al-Imrān (3):104.

ii Al-Bīrūnī is one of the earliest Muslim scholars who talked about the best methodology in examining religions or the field of comparative religion *(religionswissenshaft)* from the Islamic perspective. He had come up with the approach of *"scientific and an objective"* methodology in examining, studying and analysing the existing religions of the world. His effort was compiled in his writing *Kitāb al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al Khaliyah* which was popularly known as *Kitāb al-Āthār*, in the year 999 C.E.(Abū Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad Al-Bīrūnī . 1923. *Kitāb al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al Khaliyah*, was edited by Edward S. Sachau. Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz). The work was translated into English by Sachau entitled *Al-Bīrūnī's Chronology af Ancient Nations or Vestiges of the Past*. 1983. Lohore: Hijra International Publisher.

iii This book is his second *magnum opus* which also stressed on the study of religion, particularly Hinduism and its civilization. The original title of the book is Fī *Tahqīq Mā li al-Hind min Maqūlah fī al-'Aql aw Mardhūlah*. This book was translated by Edward C. Sachau with the title *Albêrûnî's India*. 1983. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corp.

iv A part of this sentence was quoted from Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman. 1996. *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft: A Case study of the Works and Contribution of Abū Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad Al-Bīrūnī*, Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), p. 58.(this is the outcome of her thesis for her PhD, ISTAC, 1996).

v This method is the manner of which the overall data analysis is conducted about the religions studied with reference to logical and dialectical elements. The method not only adopted to record or report, the way it is done by modern historians and anthropologists, but the purpose is to examine the facts behind each religion by understanding the perceptions of the disciples, way of life and the differences of the whole aspect existed in the history or civilisation of a religion, namely the belief, principle, culture and holy book. All these will awaken the truth of every religion being examined. It is from this point that the accuracy of study can be achieved and the aspects of bias and prejudice be prevented.

vi Hasan Askari is an activist who owns great experiences in inter-faith dialogue especially the Christian-Muslim dialogues. His involvement started as early as the 1970s with him participating in various inter-faith dialogue events, multi-dimensional lectures which related to inter-religion relationships and wrote many books and articles in the aspect of Christian-Islam relationships.

vii Dr. Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman is a lecturer in the Usuluddin and Comparative Religion Department, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. She is also very active in inter-faith relational activities and inter-faith dialogues.

viii This elaboration is written by her in an article entitled "Inter-Religious Dialogue-Moving Forward: Setting Premises and Paradigms".

ix Reverend Dr. Paul Tan Chee Ing is the Director for the Catholic Research Centre in 1987. For further information, please refer to, Ghazali Basri, "A Comparative Study on Religious Torelance:", p.112.

x Ghazali Basri, "A Comparative Study on Religious Tolerance:", page. 113(this statement was produced in his interview with Reverend Dr. Batumalai, an Anglican Priest and also a lecturer at the Malaysia Theology Seminary Kuala Lumpur dated 8 May 1986).

xi This extract is part of the Press Conference Statement delivered by Lim Kit Siang (he was, at the time, the General Secretary of DAP) at the Democratic Action Party (DAP) Headquarters on Tuesday, 7 April 1992, at 11.30 am. For further details, please refer to Lim Kit Siang. 1992. *Selected Speeches & Press Statement*, Petaling Jaya: Democratic Action Party, pp.210-211.

xii K.S. Jomo and A. Check. 1992. "Malaysian's Islamic Movement" in J. Khan and Kok Wah (ed) *Fragmented Vision: Cultural and Politic in Contemporary Malaysia*. North Sydney: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Allen and Unwin, p. 93. Also see the western writers' criticisms with regards to the Islamic Law Implementation in Kelantan in M.B. Hooker. 2003. " Submission To Allah? The Kelantan Syariah Criminal Code (II), 1993. "in Virginia Hooker & Norani Othman (ed), *Malaysia: Islam, Society and Politic,* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 80-96.

xiii Article 67 has stated that a person can only convert from his or her religion to Islam when he or she has reached the age of maturity according to Islam. Meanwhile, Article 70 has stated that non-Muslim children, under the age of puberty, can embrace Islam if their families decide to do so. This indicates that the maturity age determined by Islam is younger than the age determined by the Civil Law. Therefore, firstly; they opposed to the definition of Islam, whereby it should not be applied to the non-Muslims as it contradicts with the provision on freedom of religion. Secondly; it is seen as a process to encourage the non-Muslims to embrace Islam. A large number of non-Muslim leaders have assumed that the influence of Islam is reinforced towards the non-Muslim community. For further detail on the controversy arising from the implementation of the enactment, please refer to Kikue Hamayotsu. 2003. " Politics of Syariah Reform: The Making of the State Religio-Legal Apparatus", in Virginia Hooker & Norani Othman (ed), *Malaysia: Islam,Society and Politics*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 70-72.

xiv The government's education policy called the National Education Policy, has undergone several phases. At the initial stage, it seeks to replace the education system of the colonizer in the effort to instill the spirit of nationalism following independence as the implementation will form a new identity having loyalty to his race and country". Among the phases is 1) Penyata Razak (Razak Report) (1956), which later on inserted in the 1957 Education Ordinance. (2) The Rahman Talib Report (1960) dictated in the 1961 Educational Act. (3) the 1996 Education Act "Education must be given specific priority in the development of the country as to provide labour force that is educated, skilled and highly motivated also generating responsible, united, disciplined, moralized, balanced, harmonious and capable citizens in building one's well-being that contribute to the prosperity of the country. For further information, please see Nazaruddin Hj Mohd Jali *et al* , *Malaysian Studies: Nationhood and Citizenship*, pp. 323-324.

xv This is quoted from the speech delivered by Anwar Ibrahim in the forum "Islamisation and Nation Building" held on 23 October 1985 at the YMCA Hall, Brickfield, Kuala Lumpur. For further details, pelase refer to Catholic Asia News, December 85/January 85, pages. 4-5; Ghazali Basri, "A Comparative Study on Religious Tolerance:", pp. 110-111.

xvi Taken from the closing speech delivered by Rosemary Chong a Christian follower and the then Deputy Minister of Sports and Culture in The Role of Religion in Nation Building Seminar which was organised by *Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhim (MCCBCHS)* , on 7 April 1984. For further details, please refer to T.A. Rahman & Tan Chee Kon.1984. *Contemporary Issues on Malaysian Religions*, t.t.p: Pelanduk Publisher, p.p 200-2003; Also refer to Ghazali Basri, "A Comparative Study on Religious Tolerance:", p.111.

xvii Modus Vivendi implies the temporary agreement that has been made, although the needs to live together are different, as one waits for a more permanent modus Vivendi.

xviii Among significant discussions made to become the substance of the inter-faith dialogue are (1) The purpose of dialogue, (2) The principles of dialogue, (3) The guideline of dialogue, (4) The methodology of dialogue and (5) The rules of dialogue. Further elaborations on these basic aspects can be referred to in Khairulnizam Mat Karim & Suzy Aziziyana Saili, "Inter-faith Dialogue:"pp. 31-40.

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