
INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS A MEDIUM OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC DA'WAH

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Abstract. Interfaith dialogue is a form of discussion and information exchange between the devotees of different religions, while da'wah is a form of preaching to Islam. In the context of opportunity, Muslims should accept the challenge of participation in interfaith dialogue. So thus preparation and knowledge about da'wah and interreligious dialogue has become a necessity before involving in interfaith dialogue. Based on the nature of inter-religious dialogue that emphasizes on openness, willingness to listen to different views and based on knowledge, then this method should be taken seriously by the Muslim in the context of contemporary da'wah to propagate Islam to the masses. Finally this paper concluded interfaith dialogue in Malaysia has a great potential and in the growing interest among the Muslim community in particular.

Keywords: Interreligious Dialogue; da'wah

Abstrak. Dialog antaragama adalah bentuk diskusi dan pertukaran informasi antara para pemeluk agama yang berbeda, sementara dakwah adalah bentuk dakwah kepada Islam. Dalam konteks kesempatan, umat Islam harus menerima tantangan partisipasi dalam dialog antaragama. Jadi persiapan dan pengetahuan dakwah dan dialog antaragama telah menjadi kebutuhan sebelum terlibat dalam dialog antaragama. Berdasarkan pada sifat dialog antaragama yang menekankan pada keterbukaan, kesediaan untuk mendengarkan pandangan yang berbeda dan berdasarkan pada pengetahuan, maka metode ini harus ditanggapi dengan serius oleh Muslim dalam konteks kontekstualisasi dakwah untuk menyebarkan Islam kepada massa. Akhirnya makalah ini menyimpulkan dialog antaragama di Malaysia memiliki potensi besar dan dalam minat yang tumbuh di kalangan komunitas Muslim pada khususnya.

Kata Kunci: Dialog antaragama; da'wah

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Introduction

Dialogue between religions is a form of interaction that is increasingly attracts public attention, especially intellectuals and scholar of religious movements. It is also a fact that dialogue between religions has flourish in the European countries. However this does not mean the development of dialogue between religions is bleak in the State of Muslims, especially in Southeast Asia. The phenomenon of interreligious dialogue indicates the sensitivity of contemporary society towards the issues regarding religion and its relationship between multi-religious societies.

Dialogue between religions has great potential in the context of da'wah. In the history of Islam, it has been recorded on how the dialogue between Muslims and Christians occurred successfully when Muslim scholars are able to raise an argument based on logical reasoning and superiority of the Qur'an. This mark the Muslims in that era are ready for dialogue and discussions with non-Muslims, particularly the Christians. The emergence of scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah and his book "Al-Sahih al-Answer" and al-Shahrastani in his distinguished work in the context of comparative religion "al-Milal wa al-Nihal", is a manifestation of knowledge and authority of the Muslim were at their height.

Inter-religious dialogue should be a medium by the Muslim community to introduce Islam to non-Muslims. Interfaith dialogue should be viewed as a method for contemporary da'wah among Muslims. In fact, this dialog can be a tool for enhancing information and knowledge about other religions. This is because through good understanding of other religion, the da'wah approach would be more effective. The purpose of this paper, first it will discuss the concept of inter-religious dialogue as presented by scholars and researchers in inter-religious dialogue. This was followed by the discussion of da'wah and the requirement needs by the Muslims to ensure that messages of Islam are well digested. Further discussion will be focused on how interfaith dialogue can be used as an approach to preserve the message of Islam in Malaysia especially among various religions.

The Concept of Dialogue Between Religion

The etymology of the word dialogue is derive from Greek word "Dialectic" which refers to the meaning of "discourse" in English.(W.L.Reese, 1996:175) While according to the *Kamus Dewan*, the meaning of dialogue is referring to speech, discussion, negotiation or an open exchange of ideas between two or more parties. (Noresah Baharom, 2000: 302)

As for the Arabic Language, dialogue can be referred to as "al-Hiwar". This word, according to Ibn Manzur can be defined as "al-ruju "" or " return". (1990:217) Based on this understanding, the word dialogue has nothing to do with the word "al-Hiwar", if scrutinized to other words used by Ibn Manzur's, it shows the word focused on the meaning of the word dialogue. See for example the word "yatahawaruna" which means "their dialogue" or "their changing ideas during the discussion"

Dialogue can also be defined as,

...a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behavior and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. It can therefore be seen as an arena in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can rise. (Bohm et. Al.,1991)

The Encyclopedia of Religion defines dialogue between religion as, “*conversation (dialogue) about the meaning of beliefs, ritual and ethic...*” While the The Harpercollins Dictionary of Religion describe the dialogue between religion 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*”.(Jonathan, 1996: 317).

From the perspective of semantic, the word "dialogue", "discourse", "al-hiwar" or "discussion" is referring to the same meaning of exchanging ideas and information on certain issues or concern with openness for the purposes of seeking harmony. This understanding provides several noteworthy implications. Among them is the impression that the dialogue or discussion related to matters of religion often touch on issues that are quite sensitive. Upon that, the willingness and openness of those involved in the process is needed. Not only so, they should also be willing to listen to different opinion and requires a good level of knowledge about the religions involved in the dialogue.

Brief History of Interfaith Dialogue Movement in Malaysia

In Malaysian context, inter-religious dialogue movement has occurred since Malaysia gained independence. Pure Life Society is reported to be the first organization in Malaysia involved in the movement of interfaith dialogue. This organization was established in 1949 right after the World War and was formally registered on July 15, 1950. The founder of this organization is Swami Satyananda and he is active in welfare programs. Most of their activities are focused on dialogue, lectures, forums and other social activities. (Yusri, 2008: 254).

In 1963, the Malaysian Inter-Religious Organization was established. Following the sequel of relatively slows movement or lack of activity, the organization name has been changed to Association of Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship (InSaF). In addition to these organizations there are other association and organizations from the private sector or government body among them is Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN). MIN was established in 2002. Initially this organization is an initiative of a group consisting of a multi-party group that held a roundtable meeting in Taiping, Perak. Through resolution from the conference, they finally agreed to set MIN which are consisting many other organizations, namely: (Yusri, 2008:258)

- 1) Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF)
- 2) Malaysian Colsultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism
- 3) Sisters in Islam
- 4) International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)
- 5) Council of Church of Malaysia (CCM)
- 6) Society of Jesus
- 7) Rosicrucian
- 8) The Theosophical Society (TS)
- 9) Sri Sathya Sai Central Council of Malaysia (SAI)
- 10) The Baha’i Faith
- 11) Baha’is of Penang Island
- 12) Persatuan Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga

- 13) Altruistic Leadership Institute (ALI)
- 14) The Taiping Peace Initiative (TPI)
- 15) Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, representative office to Malaysia
- 16) Institut Kajian Dasar (IKD)
- 17) World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA)
- 18) Kumpulan Aktivistis Media Independen (KAMI)
- 19) The New Straits Times
- 20) The Star
- 21) Herald
- 22) Rotary Club, Taiping

While in the context of the Malaysian Government response to this phenomenon, in 1992 the Institute Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM) has been established. The establishment of IKIM is to meet these following objective:

- a) Carry out independent and collaborative researches as well as consultancy activities that address issues at hand in depth from both the holistic and integrated Islamic viewpoints;
- b) Function as a forum for Muslims and non-Muslims, scholars to discuss and analyse issues that concern both parties;
- c) Create in-depth awareness and understanding of international issues that affect interests of Muslims, directly or indirectly;
- d) Publish printed and non-printed materials pertaining to Islam in the contemporary world for mass consumption purposes;
- e) Provide information concerning Muslim affairs globally, and to contribute towards policy formulation at national and international levels;
- f) Foster communication and cooperation with all relevant institutions or organizations from which experiences and resources can be shared and enhanced.

The process of information dissemination and promotions of IKIM activities is channeled through bulletin, newspapers, books, pamphlets and radio broadcasts run by IKIM itself. To introduce IKIM internationally, numerous seminars and conferences were held involving participants and presenters from abroad. Even IKIM themselves were involved in many discourse and conference activities at international level. At the same time there are some fellow researchers among intellectuals from abroad at IKI.

In the context of the dialogue between religious movements, IKIM also involved with advocating series of seminars and conferences that involving various religions with the intent to exchange opinion on selected issues. Based on the involvement of IKIM in dialogue, the issues being discussed is more an attempt to clarify issues that arise in Malaysia such as an Islamic state, the Islamic leadership, economics and education. IKIM approaches in dialogue seem more intellectual. It may be because the issues being discussed is quite advanced thus the participants invited are among intellectuals.

However, this phenomena show that Malaysians are now more sensitive to religious issues and the harmonious relationship between Muslims and Non-Muslims. In the era of the 1970s and 1980s it is known to be an era of the rise of Islam, the Islamic movement approach to the non-Muslims seem quite slow. If there is any, in the context of disseminating information about Islam to non-Muslims is quite limited. (Muhammad Bakar, 1987) However, the 1990's and 2000 and later Muslim reaction to the need to engage in interfaith dialogue as an approach to introduce Islam to non-Muslims seem ever

increasing. This is a positive development in building inter-religious harmony in Malaysia which is unique in term of the composition of a multi-ethnic society, religion and culture.

Categories of inter-religious dialogue

In general, writers classify the type of dialogue in two forms, verbal or oral and paper and written production. The form of verbal or oral may occur in seminar, discourse or public speeches or daily interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. In detailed the categories can be form into verbal dialogue or interaction, then it can be presented in several forms as follows:

a) Daily dialogue or dialogue of life

This dialogue refers to the interaction and cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslims communities. The relationships occur in various places such as in markets, schools, universities or office are more informal in nature. At this point, the dialogue is instrumental to meet the daily requirement. There is a possibility that issues related to theology such as the nature god, divine prophecy or scripture is not the main discussion in the community. Instead, the concern is more towards to meet the daily needs of life.

This means that such dialogue requires a process of meetings and communications among various religious groups. The result of the meeting may be able to build an understanding among communities regarding the differences on religion system and its values between Muslims and non-Muslims. Although the form of such dialogue still showing weakness as each party is still prejudiced on each other thus ultimately brings negative portrayal on their own religion. For example, the West still think of acts of terrorism and violence as the actions of the Muslims. While Muslims still consider that the West is Christian and the Christian is West. (Ahmad Sunawari Long, 2003:65)

In the context of Islamic da'wah, this approach can create interest among non-Muslims to understand Islam, provided the Muslims themselves should set an example. Every and conduct of Islamic society can easily capture a person's interest to Islam. To make sure the message of Islam reaches the target group, the process of dialogue are highly considered.

b) Social Dialogue

Social dialogue can be considered as forms of cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims on issues agreed such as poverty, loitering, road safety and other issues related to the community. Some social observers also adopted the term as an "action dialogues". This is based on a multi-religious society needs to collectively address community issues together either through the formation of a committee or any other platform solely for the purpose of "common issues". (Ahmad Sunawari Long, 2003: 66) At this stage the religion devotees will submit views on their religious attitude towards these issues. It is believed if such a dialogue begin with their religious statement the result is better. Even in such dialogue it may not raise suspicion and distrust between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Through such dialogue, the message of da'wah about Islam can be applied. This is because the Muslims will explain the stance and approach of Islam in dealing with the problems been discussed. Likewise, non-Muslims would explain their religious stance and approach to the issue. In the

capacity of the greater good and to take care of well being and harmony of society, it turns out Islam as a religion of peace always encourage its believers to bring goodness to the community. This is consistent with the purposes of the following Qur'anic verse:

You are the best of peoples ever raised up for mankind; you enjoin *Al-Ma'ruf* and forbid *Al-Munkar*, and you believe in Allah.

(Surah Al-Imran:110)

And We have sent you (O Muhammad) not but as a mercy for the '*Alamin*.

(Surah Al-Anbiya': 107)

This shows that Islam is ready to offer the idea of harmony through cooperation and dialogue with non-Muslims.

c) Theology Dialogue

This dialogue is focus on the discussion on theological questions such as deity, prophethood, revelation and others. Through theological dialogue, each religion will present their concept of religion without making a distinction between one religion and another religion. But those involved in this dialogue will indirectly be able to make the difference between religions. While some might think this dialogue can cause grave concern among non-Muslims, but it is good in the context to know each other.

The theology dialogue would give strength and confidence for Islam. This is because Islam has a clear answer on theology matter. Even theological issues should be explored more often in order to have a dialogue. Here no question of conversion, because the end result of this dialogue is mutual understanding, tolerance, and openness to the differences that exist between one religion and another religion.

d) Academic Dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue in the form of academic discussion often refers to the discussion among the scholars in a more organized manner. Generally, such a dialogue would involve some academic figures to discuss a number of issues that have been identified. The final goal is to develop an understanding between devotees of various religious groups. The form of dialogue is often a two-way communication with the purpose of every religion or particular religious scholars will present their facts and reasoning related to the issues to clarify their religion stance and views on the issue. (Ahmad Sunawari Long, 2003:67)

e) Spiritual Dialogue

Spiritual dialogue was referring to the religious experience that will be joined together with other members or devotees of different religions. They may be involved in the ritual of meditation or any other religious rites performed by others. However this spiritual dialogue did not get consensus among theologians. This is because it involves the practices and beliefs that difficult to be adapted in other religion even on purpose to gain experience. This means that in

doing interfaith dialogue, the question of values, ethics and culture should be considered. (Thomas F. Michel, SJ, <http://www.sjweb.info/Documents/dialogo/Dialogueofliberation.doc>)

Writing Dialogue: The Experience of Muslim Scholars

Another form of a dialogue that has been made by Muslim scholars over the years is the dialogue through writing. Such forms can be categorized into two parts, writing about other religions simply to know or in-depth studies about the value and understanding of religion among its follower. In the history of Islam, al-Biruni writing about Hindus can serve as an example. In this regard, al-Biruni able to study Hindu religion and record it in writing. Even though his approach is a purely ethnographic record, but it is loaded with information.

Writing about other religions among the Muslims not only able help better Muslim scholars to understand their pattern of thinking and religious life, but it also provides information to Muslim da'i in expanding the Islamic Da'wah movement. In Ibn Taymiyyah writing has shown its strength in terms of logical argument and approach adopted by him has made the Christians acknowledge his writings. Such works not only give the Muslim strength and confidence but it even shows the height of Islam compared to other religions.

Why Should Muslims involved in interfaith dialogue?

Spontaneous answer to the question is because the Qur'an urges Muslims to mobilize good dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. In the context of this discussion, the authors will focus on the meaning of some passages of the Quran verses that called for dialogue.

If dialogue is interpreted as discussion or debate so it appears in the Quran that shows such purposes as in Surah al-Nahl: 125, Surah al-Ankabut: 46, Surat al-Kahf: 34 and 37, Surah al-Mujadalah: 1, Chapter al-Anfal: 6 and Surat al-Hajj: 8.

Following some excerpts here:

“Invite (mankind) to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better...” (Surah al-Nahl: 16: 125)

“And argue not with the people of the Scripture, unless it be in that is better...” (Surah al-Ankabut, 29: 46).

Quotes from the two verses above indicate (1) an urged to Muslims to build relationship with non-Muslim through dialogue and face to face communications. (2) The main message in the dialogue is that Muslims to show the virtues of good discussion and debate. (3) The moral element in the dialogue session should be translated as a form of "da'wah bil-hal", which is very effective in captivate non-Muslims to Islam.

Even in Sira of the prophets also clearly indicate the occurrence of a dialogue with non-Muslims for the purpose of spreading the message and information about Islam. This show a dialogue is a practical and effective form of da'wah to show strength and truth of Islam.

Specifically dialogue between religions can enlighten non-Muslims about Islam. Here the authors put forward a number of reasons in an effort to intensify the dialogue between religions for the development da'wah. The following explanation:

a) Islam has the answer to all problems

In human life whether as a Muslims or non-Muslims, are often confronted with the problem. Even life itself is a process to manage problems. As Muslims, we believe that there is no problem without a solution. Even Islam as an inclusive religion offers an alternative to the problems encountered by people every day. The argument has been deeply ingrained in the Muslim community in Malaysia since the re-emergence of Islam till today.

If observed on the issues that are often raised in the dialogue its includes the question of theological such as the nature of God, the oneness of God, the concept of God in Islam and the concept of worship; social issues, such as polygamy, inheritance, gender, head scarves; thoughts such as love of God, why people need religion, the issue of natural disasters and relationship with God's grace and the issue of Ramadan and Aidil Fitri. (See Kirit Shah, 2009)

The issues raised are generally universal. What does it mean by universal issue is that the issues often raised by international media such as "hijab" issues, violence, polygamy, gender and inheritance. And based on the issues raised by civil society in Malaysia as experienced by Kirit Shah, apparently it needs to be approached through dialogue and face to face with non-Muslims to give clarity on the issues.

b) Dialogue for peace

In the current situation where Muslims are often labeled as the originator of the trouble and disturb the tranquility of the society, therefore it is the responsibility of Muslims to continue promoting Islam as a religion of peace through dialogue session between religions. It is important to explain to global society that Islam is the religion of peace rather than conflict. With that the dialogue is able to shape the state of peace and order on three phenomena namely: (Youroukov, 2001:55)

1. ...religion represents this essential element, inseparable from culture, on which the establishment develops and the enduring of culture itself depends.
2. The establishment of dialogue between religions is the indispensable condition for the existence and further expansion of intercultural dialogue.
3. A dialogue appears to be the only humane meaningful option for intercultural and interreligious relations and the only hopeful remedy against further occurrences of interreligious and interethnic conflicts.

This is because the fight against misconception among non-Muslims about Islam is not an easy task. It takes a long time, but the effort must start now towards that direction. Approach to inter-religious dialogue to identify issues that are often raised for discussion topic should be the theme.

Although the effect may not be so significant in the short term, but at least it show an effort has been taken by the Muslim.

c) To Show the beauty of Islam

The beauty and grandeur of Islam need to be promoted through both print media and electronic media. Especially in todays situation where Islam is often being diminished by Western. Although Muslims are probably not able to eliminate all the negative perception of Islam, but by participating in interfaith dialogue, most Muslims will display his willingness to face challenges and thus ready to correct every negative impression.

d) To win the minds of non-Muslims

Interfaith dialogue can also be used as an avenue for Islamic scholars to understand non-Muslim mind and thinking. Without face to face and social engagement, Muslims were not able to capture and penetrate the minds of non-Muslims. In this context, perhaps we can learn from the history of the colonial rule over Malays through the domination of colonial authorities through the mastery of the mind and the Malay culture. Results and research interaction colonial authorities eventually they not only dominate the Malays but also bring back the body of knowledge to serve as a source of study in their country. In this regard, Prof Dr Shamsul Amri explain the success of the colonial are: (2000:192-193)

- a. Mastering the indigenous language to facilitate communication between the colonists and the local community;
- b. Gather information on the social life of society and the environment for the purpose of knowing the pattern of the local community;
- c. Obtain statistical material through the census research.
- d. Information was stored and exhibited for the purpose of introducing community patterns to those interested;
- e. Form espionage and intelligence system that guaranteed colonial security through fingerprint system, identity cards and other forms;
- f. Build a library in a shaped of historiography to be used as teaching material handed down to the colonized.

In the context of inter-religious dialogue, it is a need for the researchers and the Muslims to try and win the minds of the non-Muslim culture through interaction, communication, discussion and readings which are then recorded in scholarly literature. This is not only to enrich the knowledge produced by Islamic scholars but more importantly as a means to convey the message of Islam.

What is the requirement for those who wish to engage in dialogue?

To engage in interfaith dialogue, one should make a full preparation in terms of knowledge, skills and emotions. This is because the discussion or dialogue between religions usually involve issues that rather sensitive. But this can be overcome if the participant has made early preparations for an issue to be discussed.

- 1) Make a deep research on an issue;
- 2) Build skills to convey the message;
- 3) Using language that is easily understood by the participants;
- 4) Give an answer to every question in an objective manner;
- 5) Knowing the different religious communities of thought;

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion clearly shows the dialogue as a vehicle able to be a good tool of the da'wah for the Muslims as long as they willingly take that chance. In terms of mental preparation and in term of the depth of knowledge, it is something that is needed in ensuring the successful inter-religious dialogue. Even Muslims should also do research on the forms of dialogue that had happened at the height of Islamic civilization that can be a catalyst for the latest generation of Muslims. Clearly dialogue between religions in Malaysia have good prospects and this requires a strong commitment from within the Muslim community itself.

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