NON-MUSLIM RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND MUSLIM RESPONSE IN MALAYSIAN INTER-RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Malaysia is a multi-religious country. Apart from Islam as the religion of the Federation, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and other religions are freely practised by their believers. However, in some circumstances, a small number of religious practices created misunderstandings among the believers which became inter-religious issues at the national level. This paper discusses non-Muslim religious practices which are unaccepted by Muslims in the Malaysian inter-religious discourse, with the objectives of (1) analysing Muslim linguistic disagreement over non-Muslim religious practice, and (2) explaining the reasons behind the disagreement. The discussion is based on the pragmatic approach proposed by Crystal (1999): the language from its users' point of view, especially the choices they make, the constraints they face when using the language in social interaction, and the effect of the use of the language on other users. The data in the discussion are four religious issues from 2006 to 2011, published in a local newspaper, which are the translation of the Bible into the Malay language, shopping with dog, religious insult and Christianisation. Interviews with religious authorities are also conducted. The discussion shows that the disagreement linguistically can be traced from the keywords, such as disappointment, discomfort, anger, insensitivity, misunderstanding, disrespect, unhappiness, provocation, tragedy, violent stream, prejudice, doubtful, and hidden agenda. All words denote negative meaning. The results also show that the reasons behind the disagreement are connected with non-linguistic factors, such as media role, extreme NGOs, religious history, lack of understanding, lack of information, lack of education about religious tolerance, negligence, individual attitudes, politicisation and prejudice. The findings reveal that religious understanding and tolerance in Malaysia still needs to be strengthened. Mutual religious understanding must be cultivated by introducing comparative religious studies at the tertiary level, and by encouraging inter-religious dialogue in dealing with human and social issues like poverty, corruption, good values and others.

Keywords: Religious Discourse Analysis, Language and Religion, Religious Language.

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-religious country. Apart from Islam as the religion of the Federation, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and other religions have freedom of religion. The high level of religious tolerance during the last three decades (Shamsul, 2007; Shamsul & Sity, 2013) has contributed to a peaceful and prosperous life in maintaining the future of inter-religious discourse in Malaysia. However, the inter-religious discourse among different religious adherents is not always easy to handle. In some circumstances, a small number of religious practices caused by misunderstandings among different followers take place as inter-religious issues at the national

level.

This paper discusses non-Muslim religious practice that disagreed with Muslims in Malaysian inter-religious discourse, with the objectives of (1) analysing Muslim linguistic disagreement over non-Muslim religious practice, and (2) explaining the reasons behind the disagreement.

The analysis of Muslim linguistic disagreement over non-Muslim religious practice means that the meaning is not a function of language per se, but rather arises from language use. The explanation of the reasons behind Muslim disagreement refers to the function of linking analysed text to other connected discourses (intertextuality) and to historical and synchronic contexts, i.e. the factors that have influenced the use of religious text, in religious issues.

2. Literature Review

Contemporary religious revival is not restricted to any one religion. It has become a universal phenomenon (Bakar, 1987, p. 3). The revival in embracing and understanding religion has seen an increased number of scholars conducting studies in intercultural communication from interreligious perspectives (Ishii et al, 2003).

Acceptance of diversity and difference does not rule out the possibility of necessary interreligious and intra-religious criticism. O'Grady and Scherle (2007) rightly state that any apposite theology of religion or inter-religious relations needs to include not only reflections by a religion 'on the observation of other religions from the outside' but also 'theological reflection' by a religion upon itself (O'Grady & Scherle, 2007, p. 8).

The underlying assumption of inter-religious discourse is that despite differences and disparities between religions, there is basic human commonality which makes it possible for people to communicate with one another and to discover how we can learn to understand and embrace each other's religion. However, it is a fact that neither the challenge nor how such dialogue is to be worked out will be the same for everyone. Diversification should be matched with understanding and communication which requires pressing articulation, locally and globally (Sharpe, 2005).

In a study which sets out to determine the religious language, Naeem et al, (2014) state that religious language is a register that represents the variation of language, used in the setup of religion, from the everyday language and other setups. It is totally different from everyday language. It is the language in which certain aspects of everyday language are altered or sometimes suspended. Language of religion is considered prior to everyday language.

Some of the richest work on religious language can be divided into that which focuses on meaning and that which focuses on form, though the two are usually closely linked. Studies that focus on meaning, especially as conveyed by metaphor (Calame-Griaule, 1986; Fernandez, 1982, 1986; Wagner, 1986; Weiner, 1991; Witherspoon, 1977), tend to stress the richness and polyvalent qualities of religious language (although often only according to semantic content). Conversely, studies of form often ascribe to ritual language a certain semantic poverty.

In terms of religious meaning, the scriptures are formative for understanding of God and God's purposes; for prayer, worship and liturgy; for normative teaching; for imagination and ethos; and so on. All religions meet new situations and are challenged to change over time, and if a new development is at all important, it is inevitable that debate about it will appeal to scripture (Ford, 2006).

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether Muslims and Christians believe in the same God. Some modern Christian theologians have argued for a serious rethink of the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation so that Christians and Muslims may come closer together. This problematically moves back to monotheism without the Trinity and with Jesus as a Jewish rabbi.

It also means a new form of Christianity that Muslims are likely to question as being suspiciously akin to liberal modernity (Kung, 2007).

In Christianity, the human-divine personality of Christ and his sacrifices are central to the faith as an ultimate truth expressed in human terms. However, in the Islamic tradition, it is Allah who is the One God, who is the central reality of the religion, and out of his deep commitment to his creatures he communicates to human beings through human prophets and/ or messengers.

Both the Prophet Muhammad in Islam and Christ in Christianity are different in their roles as 'messengers', yet there are many similarities to each other. The focus in Islam is not how Allah manifested himself to his creatures; rather it is God's nature and his essence in all things that is captured in living, in things known and unknown, in the temporal realm and in the world beyond our understanding.

For the present purposes, some of the most important aspects of existence thus understood are those that relate to human nature on the one hand, and humankind's relation to God and the universe on the other. A few aspects of these weighty matters will now be briefly highlighted with a view to indicating some of the metaphysical and ethical moorings of human dignity (and hence of human rights) in the fundamental teachings worldwide of Islam.

The reason behind Muslim disagreement over non-Muslim religious practice refers to historical background and tradition between them. Ishii (2008) points out that the inter-religious conflict and inter-ethnic conflict that are happening at present may be attributed to the natural epitomes of such postcolonial and postmodern ideological movements. The extensive study points to these conflicts and battles are 'based on long-standing and deep-rooted religious-ethical traditions and identities' (Ishii, 2008, p. 135).

Surprisingly, today, however, Bakar (1987, p. 3) asserts that 'far from being buried in the dustbin of history, religion is making a comeback'. Contemporary religious revival is not restricted to any one religion. It has become a universal phenomenon (Bakar, 1987, p. 3). The revival in embracing and understanding religion has seen an increased number of scholars conducting studies in intercultural communication from interreligious perspectives (Ishii et al, 2003).

By the early fifteenth century, indigenous Malay culture had developed as a confluence of beliefs, cultures and ethnicities, with influences emanating from India, China and the Middle East. As Wan Hashim (1983) notes, "there was a highly developed Malay culture that was accepted by all communities in the Malay Peninsula". The Malay had adopted Islam, which soon became a strong indicator of his identity. To be Malay meant and still means, being a Muslim.

In Shamsul's (2005) words, Islam is now embedded in the pre-existing historical and sociological contours of the Malay world's civilization scape. Malay, the lingua franca used in trade and commerce, was the principal language of communication. The Malay world had to co-exist with Hindu and Buddhist influences. Such were the connections that, with the passage of time, the Malay world "provided immigrants a place in history and a process for becoming a local". This meant that through "shared activities or inter-marriage" an immigrant could, after some time, be embraced as part of the extended family (Hoffstaedter, 2008).

Here, it is worth stressing that, in the Malay world, the embedding of Islam had taken place in circumstances entirely different from those that had prevailed in the 'tribal' Arab world, home to the Prophet, where Islam itself had originated, and a region that was not subject to Buddhist or Hindu influences, at least not to the same extent. The spirit of the accommodation with which Islam was received in the Malay world, and the ensuing equilibrium, were shattered with the advent of British colonialism.

The introduction during the nineteenth century of Chinese and Indian immigrants as tin miners and rubber plantation workers created an ethnically and religiously diverse but segmented

society, each group with its own language, culture and religious beliefs. British reliance on divide and rule policies weakened any common threads that might connect these groups. Some felt isolated and discriminated against in relation to others.

Experiencing increasing powerlessness, the Malay community turned to the faith that was at the core of its culture. Many of the faithful had performed the hajj in Mecca and had interacted with pilgrims from the Middle East. Not surprisingly, a spirit of religious revival took hold through much of British Malaya during the 1920s.

3. Methodology

The analysis is based on the pragmatic approach proposed by Crystal (1999), a British linguist, that language can be analysed from its users' point of view, especially the choices they make, the constraints they face when using the language in social interaction, and the effect of the use of the language on other users.

The data in the discussion are four religious issues published in three local newspapers: *The Star Online, The Malay Mail Online*, and *Free Malaysia Today*: (1) the translation of the Bible into the Malay language, (2) shopping with dog, (3) religious insult, and (4) Christianisation, from 2006 to 2015. These four non-Muslim religious practices have been responded to negatively by Muslims in Malaysian inter-religious discourse. The interviews with four Muslim authorities represented by four Muftis from four states are also conducted. The data from newspapers are indicated by the newspapers' name while data from the interviews are labelled Q and A.

3. 1 The Bible in the Malay Language

It is the Bible published in the Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia issue. The Malaysian government detained 35,100 copies of the Bible and imposed certain conditions for their release; for instance, the Home Ministry stamped the words 'This Good News (Malay) Bible is for use by Christians only'. Besides that, the covers of these Bibles had to carry serial numbers, on the 5,100 copies. This was done without consulting the importer, the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM), which initially refused to collect them as it had neither accepted nor agreed to the new conditions. On 17 March 2011, the Home Ministry stamped the serial numbers a day after the government issued a release order for the Bibles which had been detained in Port Klang (*The Star Online,* 17 March 2011). Another 30,000 copies were detained at a port in Kuching after the Sarawak state Home Ministry told the local chapter of Gideons International that it could collect them if the organization would put the stamp on them (*The Star Online, 17 March 2011*).

3.2 Shopping with Dogs

Shopping with dog refers to bringing pets while shopping. This issue becomes controversial when the citizens slammed the action of two customers who brought their dogs into a hypermarket by placing the pooch into an empty trolley. This action was considered as being 'insensitive' to Muslims. The photo of the two women and their dog was captured by one of the customers at the hypermarket in Plentong, Masai. It was then uploaded onto social media sites and has since gone viral. Tesco Malaysia issued a statement on its official Facebook page, saying that it deeply regretted the incident and that it had very strict regulations on pets and animals on its premises (*The Malay Mail Online*, 2015).

3.3 Religious Insult

Religious insult refers to the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence to a God, to religious or holy persons or sacred things, or toward something considered sacred or inviolable. There were five police reports made in Johor in November 2015 against the controversial blogger Alvin Tan for insulting Islam on Facebook. Alvin allegedly used a page of the Quran as toilet paper

and posted the insulting message on Facebook. Many people are angry with his action especially the Muslim community (*Free Malaysia Today,* 2015).

3.4 Christianisation

Christianisation is the conversion of individuals to Christianity or the conversion of entire groups at once. The Universiti Teknologi Mara's (UiTM) Malacca campus had organized a seminar on threats of proselytization, which drew criticism from political parties and the Christian Federation of Malaysia (*The Malay Mail Online*, 14 December 2015). The Higher Education Ministry has defended a local university which had organised an anti-Christianisation seminar, saying that the seminar was an intellectual discussion on critical issues. This was met with criticism from the opposition bench, with DAP's Lim Kit Siang calling it a coward act (*The Malay Mail Online*, 2016). The DAP parliamentary leader told the minister of the ministry and UiTM that Malaysians have the constitutional right to freedom of religion.

4. Findings

4.1 Linguistic Disagreement Over Non-Muslim Religious Practice

4.1.1 The Bible in the Malay Language

The Bible in the Malay language issue is closely related to the use of the word 'Allah'. Muslims do not oppose the use of Bibles in the Malay language, except for the use of the word Allah; they disagreed with the translation of the word 'GOD' to Allah in the Malay language. It is because the word Allah is a special name for the Muslim GOD and it cannot be translated recklessly. The excerpt below (example 1) is from The Star Online (2011).

> **Example 1**
> The Star Online (2011):
> The Malaysian Ulama Association has no objection to the use of Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia except for the use of the word Allah. Its president Datuk Sheikh Abdul Halim Abdul Kadir said that everyone should be allowed to read and worship in the language that they understand, including the national language and supported the Government's decision to release the 35,000 copies of the Bible imported from Indonesia which were impounded at Port Klang and Kuching Port.

Some Muslims strongly oppose the translation of Bible in the Malay language. A Muslim respondent from Kuala Lumpur who disagrees with the use of the word 'Allah' by non-Muslims explains that it can discomfort Muslims because it touches their emotion, manners and culture. This issue is different in Sabah and Sarawak because non-Muslims in both states have been using the word 'Allah' without any problem as can be seen in example 2.

> **Example 2**
> Interview with the Mufti of Federal Territories:
> Q: What do you think about the issue of the translation of the Bible into the Malay language?
> A: It is different in Sabah and Sarawak which although they are multiracial, this issue is not a problem.

Denotatively, the issue of translation of the Bible into the Malay language caused disappointment, created discomfort and anger to Muslims. The main reason that led to the banning of Bible translation in the Malay language is that it carries the word of 'Allah' because the word Allah is exclusive to Muslims. Connotatively, for Muslims, the action of non-Muslims to translate the

Bible into the Malay language shows that they have a hidden agenda and intention of disrespect to Muslim sensitivity.

4.1.2 Shopping with Dogs

Shopping with dog becomes controversial when a photo of the two women and their dog was captured by one of the customers at the hypermarket in Johor Bahru. It was then uploaded on the social media site and has since gone viral (*The Malay Mail Online*, 2015). The citizens slammed the action of two customers who brought their dog into a hypermarket by placing the pooch into an empty trolley as being 'insensitive' to Muslims and the supermarket took the matter seriously as illustrated in example 3.

> **Example 3**
> The Malay Mail Online (6 September 2015):
> Facebook users slammed the action of two customers who brought
> their dog into a hypermarket by placing the pooch into an empty
> trolley as being 'insensitive' to Muslims.

The Muslim respondent from Johor argues that there is a misunderstanding on the issue. It relates to lack of knowledge as well as the ignorance of non-Muslims over Muslims' sensitivity as described in example 4.

> **Example 4**
> Interview with the Mufti of Johor:
> Q: What do you think about the issue of shopping with dog?
> A: Misunderstanding.

Denotatively, for Muslims, a dog is not considered a pet, unlike a cat. This is their belief and understanding based on Islamic guidance. Therefore, the issue shows non-Muslims insensitivity to what Muslims believe. Connotatively, what Muslims question is the reason why non-Muslims bring dogs along with them to shop in public places, such as shopping complexes, where Muslim customers are also around. It is due to misunderstanding and ignorance.

4.1.3 Religious Insult

The issue involved non-Muslims and was opposed by Muslims. Five police reports were made in Johor in November 2015 against the controversial blogger Alvin Tan for insulting Islam on Facebook. Alvin allegedly used a page of the Quran as toilet paper and posted the insulting message on Facebook (*Free Malaysia Today*, 13 November 2015). Many people are angry with his disrespectful action especially the Muslim community as shown in example 5.

> **Example 5**
> Free Malaysia Today (13 November 2015):
> Johor police acting chief Ramli Hassan, who confirmed the reports,
> said that so far police had received five reports – two in Johor
> Baharu North and three at the Nusajaya police station. He said
> police had also received reports on the unhappiness of the public
> over Tan's provocative action that was spread on social media
> where he used a page of the Quran as toilet paper.

The Muslim respondent from Penang stresses that the issue is very sensitive, and it can affect the religious harmony in Malaysia as stated in example 6.

> **Example 6**
> Interview with the Mufti of Penang:
> Q: What do you think about the issue of religious insult?

A: It can affect the emotions and faiths, such as sacred and holy, so
it can invite other believers' reactions.

Denotatively, the issue of religious insult concerns not only the Quran itself, but also Allah who revealed the Quran, and Islam as a religion. Muslims believe the Quran isa holy book and they have clear guidance in dealing with the Quran. Ablution must be performed before touching the Quran to show respect to the Quran. Connotatively, what they question is the use of something sacred and holy, such as the Quran as toilet paper. This action refers to uneducated and uncivilised actions.

4.1.4 Christianisation

The issue involves the controversial K-pop concert involving Muslim girls being hugged and embraced which is an evidence of liberalism and Christianisation (*The Malay Mail Online*, 16 January 2015). The Muslims strongly opposed the issue because for them liberalisation and Christianisation ideology tries to fulfil human needs to the extent of damaging religious and cultural values.

The K-pop concert has caused anger by Muslims in which a three-minute video of the artists hugging and embracing the Malay girls on stage went viral. It has succeeded in tearing down the dividing wall of Islamic identity that has been built before. Example 7 illustrated that Christianisation ideology is a tragedy to Muslims because the ideology damaged religious and cultural values linked to the K-pop concert.

Example 7

The Malay Mail Online (16 January 2015):
The state sermon called the concert as a "tragedy" to Muslims nationwide and was written by Perak deputy mufti ZamriHashim, who is also the Ipoh chief for Islamist group IkatanMuslimin Malaysia (ISMA). "Indeed, this tragedy proved that the violent stream of liberalism is an ideology that tries to fulfil all human needs even by destroying religious and cultural values — has succeeded in tearing down the dividing wall of Islamic identity that has been built before," it said.

According to the Muslim respondent from Sabah, the doctrine of Christianity based on Gold, Glory and Gospel and the conversion to Islam and then from Islam to other religion really happened in Sabah. However, it is under control because Malaysia has a law that is mentioned in example 8.

Example 8
Interview with the Mufti of Sabah:
Q: What do you think about the issue of Christianisation?
A: Today it is still happening in the case of non-Muslims who are entering Islam and then turn out of Islam, but today it is under control because Malaysia has a law.

Denotatively, Christianisation is a process of spreading out Christianity by Christians. In Malaysia, apart from Christianity, Islamisation also takes place. It is understood that every single religion must be delivered because without doing this, religion will face endangerment. Connotatively, what Muslims opposed is why other religions including Christianity are propagated among Muslims, and they are not allowed as stated in Islamic law enactments in every state in Malaysia. This creates prejudice and doubts among Muslims that Christianisation is being propagated within Muslims. There are "tricks and agenda" behind Korean pop culture that will go unnoticed among those who possess "shallow thinking".

4.2 The Reasons Behind Muslim Disagreement

4.2.1 The Bible into the Malay Language

The Muslim respondent stresses three factors; media role, a non-governmental organization (NGO) and religious history, as stated in example 9.

> **Example 9**
> Interview with the Mufti of Federal Territories:
> Q:What made the issue of the translation of the Bible into the Malay
>   language controversial?
> A: Media role, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and
>   religious history.

The media has disseminated provocative information to the people. The mass media creates the reports that were not a reflection of the actual situation. Some of the reports gave the impression as though the situation was out of control. The issue involves emotion, manners and culture especially for Muslims.

The president of Perkasa, Ibrahim Ali was threatening to burn Malay-language Bibles used by Christians as he insisted that it was the only way to stop non-Muslims from stirring the sensitivities and sentiments of the majority of the population in the country (*The Malay Mail Online*, 8 October 2014).

In terms of religious history, this practice has a long historical lineage, dating back to before the creation of the Malaysian nation-state. Munshi Abdullah who was regarded as the father of modern Malay literature has used the term 'Allah' to refer to God in his 1852 Malay translation of the Bible (Neo, 2014).

4.2.2 Shopping with Dogs

In Malaysia, shopping centres and hypermarkets remind customers not to bring along with them their pets, especially dogs, when shopping, including putting or placing their pets in the trolley to keep the sensitivity of Muslims who are the largest number of customers.

On the non-Muslim side, the Muslim respondent highlights lack of understanding and lack of information about other religious as the factor, as described in example 10.

> **Example 10**
> Interview with the Mufti of Johor:
> Q: What made the issue of shopping with dogs controversial?
> A: Non-Muslim side: Lack of understanding and lack of
> information.
> Muslim side: Negligence.

On Muslim side, the respondent admits that the negligence by Muslims prior to the incident because they did not deliver the message about dogs in Muslim life to non-Muslims.

4.2.3 Religious Insult

The Muslim respondent argues that the first factor in the issue is media. It is because the media delivered false and wrong information to readers as stated in example 11. Therefore, media must avoid reporting sensitive and fake news.

Example 11

Interview with the Mufti of Penang:
Q: What made the issue of religious insult controversial?
A: Media role, individual attitude, lack of education about
religious tolerance.

The second factor is individual attitude, like emotion and ignorance which can cause people to actout of control. Since education is important, there is a need to teach religious tolerance in religious syllabus at school.

4.2.4 Christianisation

In Sabah and Sarawak, Christianisation which is based on 3G (Gold, Glory and Gospel) is not an issue. However, in the Peninsula of Malaysia, the issue is very sensitive. It becomes contentious when a seminar on the efforts to convert Muslims to Christianity was scheduled to be held at the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Melaka has raised Muslims' dissatisfaction over some Christians (*The Malay Mail Online*, 14 December 2015).

According to the Muslim respondent, the issue has been politicised by some political parties and some of them want to be heroes as stated by a Muslim respondent in example 12.

Example 12
Interview with the Mufti of Sabah:
Q: What made the issue of Christianisation controversial?
A: The issue has been politicized by some political parties because
some politicians want to be heroes. It also about Muslim
prejudice over Christians.

Another factor is the high degree of religious prejudice. It is because the prejudice creates misunderstandings and a negative view of other religions. The prejudice also will split religious devotees from different religions into different understandings and it will threat the unity of the country.

Conclusion

The discussion shows that the disagreement linguistically can be traced from the words disappointment, discomfort, anger, insensitivity, misunderstanding, disrespectful, unhappiness, provocation, tragedy, violent stream, prejudice, doubtful, and hidden agenda. All words are denotatively having negative meanings.

The result also shows that the reasons behind the disagreement are connected with non-linguistic factors, such as media role, extreme NGOs, poor Muslim-Christian relationship in religious history, lack of understanding, lack of information, lack of education about religious tolerance, negligence, individual attitudes, politicisation and prejudice.

The findings reveal that religious understanding and tolerance in Malaysia still needs to be strengthened. Mutual religious understanding must be cultivated by introducing comparative religion studies at the tertiary education level, and encouraging inter-religious dialogue in dealing with human and social issues like poverty, corruption, good values, etc.

Acknowledgments

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