

Designing Inter-Religious Dialogue Model for the Grassroots: A Preliminary Survey

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Abstract: *In order to strengthen national unity and integration, the dialogue culture needs to be cultivated in Malaysia (Azizan Baharudin, 2008). Moreover, Malaysian society is still grounded with prejudice as this problem was never wisely dealt with (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2001). Nevertheless, the nature of current practice of inter-religious dialogue is too philosophical and theological thus the participation is limited to the elite or intellectuals. If the present model of inter-religious dialogue is meant only for the elite and not for the grassroots, how could it be the best platform for national unity and integration?. Based on this argument, an inter-religious dialogue model that is more appropriate for the grassroots need to be developed. Therefore, present research aims at exploring the nature of Malaysian society and the reality of inter-religious relations in Malaysia as an early effort to develop the inter-religious dialogue model. To achieve this goal, a survey was conducted on 426 multi-religious respondents around Klang Valley. Among the variables measured to assess the nature of Malaysian society and the reality of inter-religious relations in Malaysia were, motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement, prejudice, quantity of contact, quality of contact and inter-religious understanding. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to determine the level of variables while inferential statistical analysis was used to assess the correlation between prejudice and selected variables (i.e. skills in inter-religious engagement and quality of contact) and correlation between skills in inter-religious engagement and quality of contact. The findings suggest that Malaysian society in general has a high level of motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement, quality of contact and inter-religious understanding. The level of prejudice and the level of quantity of contact on the other hand are recorded as low. The low level of quantity of contact however can not to be underestimated since the correlation analysis has demonstrated that contact is negatively correlated with prejudice. This correlation means low level of contact is associated with high level of prejudice while high level of contact is associated with low level of prejudice. Lack of contact among Malaysian is feared can increase prejudice. All these findings envisage the need and feasibility to implement inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia. The data in this preliminary survey will guide the researcher in determining the stages, contents, processes and specific activities related to the design of inter-religious dialogue for the grassroots.*

Keywords: Inter-religious dialogue, design, grassroots, prejudice

1. Introduction

Based on the statistic revealed by Department of National Unity and Integration, there were 327 social conflict cases reported from 1996 to 2002. Social conflict revolved around religious issues were the third in the list of social conflict cases (65 cases) other than ethnic clashes which top the chart (81 cases) and political cases come in the second place (76 cases) (Nazri Muslim, 2012). According to Chandra Muzaffar, since the early years of independence till the 80s, ethnic relation in Malaysia might have been shaped by different issues such as citizenship, social contract, language, New Economic Policy, quota and urbanization issues. However, since 90s to present day, inter-religious issues would have a negative impact on ethnic relation in Malaysia (Baharum Mahusin, 2006). Syed Husin Ali (2008) underscores the sentiment in ethnic relations in Malaysia is already at its boiling point. The religious issues raised might have been influenced by the dynamic process of Islamisation in this country that took place in 1980s. This argument is supported by a research conducted by Abdul Rahman Embong (2001). The finding suggests that ethnic relation in Malaysia had experienced a dark period not only during May 1969 but also during 1980s as the government introduced the Islamisation policy as a response to Islamic resurgence movement.

Since May, 1969 and Kampung Medan, 2001 there was no serious ethnic violence cases reported. Then, how can we assure that we are experiencing sour inter-religious or inter-ethnic relations? The tension in ethnic relation in Malaysia might not have been translated into aggressive action but it has been manifested in the form of prejudice. According to Abdul Rahman Embong (2001), Malaysian society (both the minority and majority groups) is still ingrained with prejudice as this problem was never wisely dealt with. The divisive issues that emerged from perceived inequalities culturally, religiously or economically to stimulate prejudicial attitudes. This negative attitude if left unchecked will lead to inter-religious or inter-ethnic conflict which is detrimental to the multi-religious and multi-ethnic Malaysian society. Robert Hunt (2009) has identified four main issues that have stirred inter-religious and ethnic tension in Malaysia.

Among the issues are: the issue of religious freedom, demolition of temples, the demand by religions other than Islam to use Arabic words or terms which are synonymous with Islam for instance 'Allah', 'Kaabah', 'Baitullah' and 'solat'; and the prohibition of the used of the word Allah in Bible. The issues of conversion (Pankaj Jha, 2009), cow head protest in Shah Alam, Namewee's song, Ethnic Relation module and Suqiu issue, attacks on churches (Yong & Md Sidin, 2010; Carmen Nge, 2012) were only few other examples of issues that created uproar. These issues, once they became epidemic and created hostility they would not only jeopardize social harmony in the country (Zaid Ahmad et.al, 2014) but also threaten national security (Zaid Ahmad, 2014).

Inter-religious dialogue could be one of promising tools in addressing this problem. However due to its intellectual, theological and philosophical nature, few scholars such as Al-Faruqi (1992) and Kamar Oniah (2001) opine that inter-religious dialogue can only be participated by the elite and intelligentsia hence not suitable for the grassroots in general. In reality, inter-religious conflict affecting society at the grassroots level. If inter-religious dialogue is meant only for the elite, how could it be the best platform to increase inter-religious understanding and solve inter-religious issues? Based on few researches conducted on inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia (e.g., Rahimin Affandi, Mohd. Anuar, Paizah & Nor Hayati, 2011; Ghazali Basri, 2005; Suraya Sintang, Khadijah Mohd. Khambali, Azizan Baharuddin,

Mahmud Ahmad, Mohd Roslan & Nurhanisah, 2012), Malaysian society is more synonymous with dialogue of life instead of dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse.

Unfortunately, dialogue of life is unstructured, not systematically implemented, not well established and not grounded in specific theory since it is only based on daily interaction of multi-religious society. Furthermore, inter-religious dialogue or interaction is only possible if the society in particular area comprises of diverse religious and ethnic background. Therefore, the outcomes of such informal daily interaction are elusive. Present research therefore is embarked to develop a new model of inter-religious dialogue that is more appropriate for the grassroots. This model of dialogue will become the pre-arranged, facilitated and structured version of 'Dialogue of Life.' In order to actualize this endeavour, a theory called Contact Theory proposed by Gordon Allport (1954) will be incorporated in the inter-religious dialogue for the grassroots.

Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) has a good reputation in improving inter-religious or inter-ethnic relations and has been proven by few researches to facilitate superordinate identity formation and reduce bias since it fosters opportunities for "self-revealing interactions" (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996: 271). A meta-analytic test of the inter-group contact theory has further strengthened the case of contact theory for reducing prejudice and producing positive inter-group outcomes. Producing effects from 696 samples, the meta-analysis reveals that greater inter-group contact is generally associated with a lower level of prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These positive outcomes however can only be achieved if the contact occur with the present of four conditions. Those conditions are: 1. Equal group status within the group encounter 2. Common goals 3. Co-operative interactions 4. Support from those with social influence and power The proposed model of inter-religious dialogue therefore will be designed based on these four elements.

Therefore, present research aims at exploring the nature Malaysian society and the reality of inter-religious relations in Malaysia. The data gained from this preliminary survey will provide researcher with information needed to design the next phase of study related to the development of inter-religious dialogue model for the grassroots.

2. Literature Review

The Landscape of Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relation in Malaysia ***Inculcation of Islamic Cultures and Values***

The implementation of few Islamic programs and institutions by the government was considered as a support to the Islamic revivalism spirit led by various dakwah groups that had gained momentum since the 1970s (Hussin Mutalib, 1990). The commitment of the government in this endeavour was manifested through the allocation of funds for the establishment of institutions dedicated to the research and propagation of not only Islamic, but also Malay arts and cultures (Lee, 2000). Hussin Mutalib (1993) identified a few major Islamic programs that were undertaken by the government during the 1980s: 1. Policy declaration to remodel Malaysia's economic system into an Islamic one in 1980. 2. Establishment of Islamic Banks, Islamic Pawnshops, Islamic Insurance and an Islamic Economic Foundation in 1981. 3. Establishment of a permanent site for the International Islamic Training Camp in 1982. 4. Establishment of an International Islamic University Malaysia in 1983. 5. Official declaration of Islamisation of Government Machinery in 1984. 6. Declaring that the status of Islamic judges and courts was to be on par with their counterparts in the civil judiciary in 1988.

These developments caused uneasiness among non-Muslims as they felt that the continued existence of their cultural and religious identities were at risk. They presumed that the advancement of Malay cultural and Islamic symbols and practices in public space would result in the contraction of the religious symbols and practices of other communities and religious groups. Places of worship were among the issues that constantly became a source of conflict between the Muslim state and the non-Muslim community. For instance, Tan C.K (1985) argues that the state allocated large amounts of funding to build mosques while withholding funding and permits for the building of churches and temples. This was evident with the increased number of mosques throughout peninsular Malaysia. Based on interviews conducted by Abdul Rahman Embong (2001), many agree that the worst episode of inter-ethnic conflict occurred on May 13, 1969. However, the 1980s was also perceived as a dark period as ethnic relations took a plunge due to the emergence of Islamic resurgence movements.

Economic Dilemma among the Majority Malay Muslims

While the minority were of the opinion that privileges in terms of cultural and religious authority favoured the majority, the majority, represented by the state perceived the minority domination of the economic sector as a threat to the economic position of the Malays. This reality was most obvious during the post-independence period. As most Malays were only involved in the traditional agricultural sector since early history, they had been left out from full participation in the economic development of the country by the Chinese who dominated the small and medium businesses and modern sectors of employment (Lee, 2001). It was estimated that until the 1970s, the Bumiputeras held only 2.4% of the economic pie while the rest was in the hands of the Chinese and foreigners (Ho, 2005). This sense of economic deprivation, coupled with a racially charged general election campaign and a few other factors triggered ethnic riots on May 13, 1969. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was then introduced by Tun Abdul Razak, the former Prime Minister, to overcome the perceived unfair distribution of economic resources that undermined the Malay majority (Mahdi Shuid & Mohd. Fauzi Yunus, 2001).

The Reality of Prejudicial Attitudes among Malaysians

All these divisive issues emerged from perceived inequalities either culturally, religiously or economically could stimulate prejudicial attitudes. Ani Arope (2009) in his speech at a gathering of the Fulbright Association admits that Malaysian society is still ingrained with prejudice as this problem was never wisely dealt with. Instead, the existence of this problem was suppressed, and eventually, self-denial set in. This prejudicial attitude is embedded in both the minority and majority groups in this country (“Enhancing tolerance,” 2009). One of the informants in Abdul Rahman Embong’s interview (2001) admits that ethnic relations are not as close as it seems because “a lot of jealousy and prejudice toward one another still exist.”

Another informant said that the inter-ethnic or inter-religious harmony or unity that we currently experience is bounded on the basis of toleration, not so much on civility and mutual reciprocity. This unity is born “out of necessity... it is unity for survival” unity that is “instrumental, collective and artificial” and not “unity of the heart” (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2001:75-77). This reality is also evident in a recent survey conducted by Merdeka Centre in 2011. The finding revealed that offensive racial stereotyping is still prevalent among the Malaysian public. Since the last survey in 2006, belief in racist stereotypes such as “The Malays are lazy”, “The Chinese are greedy” and that “The Indians cannot be trusted” only declined marginally by 2%, 3% and 2% respectively.

These stereotypes are held not only by members of differing racial groups, but ironically, they were also accepted by members of the stereotyped community which indicates how deeply rooted these stereotypes are (Tan S. K., 2011). The terrifying May 13, 1969 incident can recur if the issue of prejudice is left unaddressed. Noteworthy is an incident in March 2002 where six people lost their lives and 44 suffered injuries due to a mass brawl that erupted between the Malay and Indian communities in Petaling Jaya (Kamaruddin M. Said, 2002). The role of prejudice as the source of racial discord is asserted by Sri Rahayu Ismail, Zaid Ahmad, Haslinda Abdullah and Norbaya Ahmad (2009). Thus, before another similar tragedy occurs, proper measures are needed to reduce prejudice, and inter-religious dialogue is a promising form of intervention for that purpose

The Concept of Inter-Religious Dialogue

According to Dunbar (1995:28) inter-religious dialogue is a platform to pursuit “greater truth and knowledge”. Khalf Muhammad al-Husayni (1975) stated that dialogue is associated with the ‘taking’ and ‘giving’ process that occurs throughout the speech between one individual and another in order to reach the truth and to increase knowledge about the other individual’s understanding of, and belief in particular subjects.

Al-Faruqi, a renowned Muslim authority on inter-religious dialogue specialising in Muslim-Christian dialogue, describes inter-religious dialogue as ‘exploring the truth’. According to him, dialogue is a dimension of human consciousness provided that (as long as that consciousness is not sceptical), a category of the ethical sense (as long as that sense is not cynical). It is the altruistic arm of Islam and of Christianity, their reach beyond themselves (al-Faruqi, 1992: 9). He continued by saying that: "dialogue is the removal of all barriers between men for a free intercourse of ideas where the categorical imperative is to let the sounder claim to the truth win. Dialogue disciplines our consciousness to recognize the truth inherent in realities and figurations of realities beyond our usual ken and reach" (al-Faruqi, 1992: 9).

Swidler (1989:343) on the other hand asserts that: "Christians need to engage in dialogue with those who have differing cultural, philosophical, social, religious viewpoints so as to strive toward an ever fuller perception of the truth". Other than the pursuit of truth, inter-religious dialogue has also been perceived as a platform to increase knowledge and understanding about others. Based on this premise, Swidler (1984) describes dialogue as a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow (Swidler, 1984: 30). Paul F. Knitter describes inter-religious dialogue as: "the interaction of mutual presence ... speaking and listening ... and witnessing the commitments, the values, and the rituals of others" (Knitter 1996: 14). The interpretation of inter-religious dialogue as proposed by Kamar Oniah (2001) also corresponds to this notion. According to her, dialogue should be a platform for participants to learn about, and understand the religions of others and their perspectives on certain issues. Dialogue should also be a platform for participants to explore ways of working together for mutual benefit. In this regard, interreligious dialogue can be divided into two categories, dialogue on religion, and dialogue on co-operation.

Inter-Religious Dialogue Design

Prominent classical comparative religious scholars like Ibn Hazm (994 C.E-1064 C.E) and al-Biruni (973 C.E - 1048 C.E) have previously outlined the methodology of dialogue in their works. In a study on Ibn Hazm entitled Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study

Of Ibn Hazm's *Kitab al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal*, Ghulam Haider Aasi (1999) identified a methodology by Ibn Hazm for examining and understanding other religions known as the dialectical-dialogical method. This methodology suggests that dialogue should involve all religious dimensions such as theology, doctrine, practices, culture, historical background and matters that involve the understanding of the Holy Qur'an (Khairulnizam Mat Karim & Suzy Aziziyana Saili, 2012).

The al-Biruni dialogical method for engaging with others can be traced to his encounter with the Hindus which was documented in his masterpiece *Kitab al-Hind* (Sachau, 1910). According to al-Biruni, developing a common and understandable language is relevant when communicating with others. He dispensed with the constraints of language by learning Sanskrit to the point where he became very proficient in that language. It would be easier for someone to communicate and understand a particular culture or religion with the use of a common language. Al-Biruni also demonstrated his non-prejudicial and non-judgemental attitude throughout his contact with the Hindus despite their apparently polytheistic belief which is highly contradictory to Islamic tawhid (Islamic doctrine of Oneness of God). This objectivity is articulated in the following excerpt: "I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute such of them, as I believe to be in the wrong. My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them" (Sachau, 1910: 7). This openness and objective attitude should be emulated and adopted by those who are interested in dialogue with people from other faiths.

Swidler (1984) outlined guidelines for what he calls 'authentic' inter-religious dialogue. In the first guideline, he states that the primary purpose of dialogue is to learn to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality. Second, inter-religious dialogue must be a two-sided project, which means the dialogue should occur within each religious community and between religious communities. Third, each participant attending a dialogue program must be sincere and honest. Fourth, Swidler suggests that any ideals should be compared with ideals, and practice should be compared with practice provided the inter-religious dialogue process occurs within the realm of practicality, spirituality and cognition, where understanding and truth are sought after. Fifth, each participant must define himself as a member of his own religion and not attempt to define members from other religions. For example, only a Muslim can define what it means to be a Muslim and likewise a Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and so forth.

Sixth, the participants must listen to the views of others with openness and sympathy, and make attempts to agree without compromising the integrity of his tradition. Seventh, dialogue can only take place among those with equal status. The eighth guideline, suggests that dialogue can only take place on the basis of mutual trust. Ninth, participants in an inter-religious dialogue must also be critical of his or her own tradition because according to Swidler, a lack of this attitude implies that one's religion has all the correct answers. Tenth, in authentic dialogue, the participants must attempt to experience other religions "from within." In addition to these guidelines, Swidler (1992) also clarifies that dialogue should be carried out with only one partner at a time, since different goals are aimed at different partners.

There is so much to be gained from al-Faruqi's method in studying and engaging with people from other faiths. The method of disengagement is one of the significant methodologies

introduced by him. This methodology suggests that while engaging in dialogue, and in order to increase one's knowledge about other religions, one must leave behind his own presumptions and existing values (Al-Faruqi, 1967). Other than suspension of judgement, al-Faruqi has also developed six principles of dialogue based on his principle of comparative religious study and meta-religion (Al-Faruqi, 1992). These six principles are designed to ensure that the dialogue conducted is free from any hidden agenda or mission. The first principle states that no dialogue is beyond critique, which means no party involved in the dialogue is allowed to make authoritarian statements which are beyond critique. The second and third principles suggest that no communication may violate the laws of internal and external coherence. This simply means that the laws of logic must exist in communication and no paradox is allowed as a final position (Fletcher, 2008).

The fourth principle states that no communication may violate the law of correspondence with reality either as corroboration or refutation. The fifth principle proposes that dialogue must be free from canonical figuration which implies that the dialogue must be free from any dominant or dogmatic stance. The sixth principle of dialogue suggests that inter-religious dialogue will be successful if it is carried out in the field of ethical and social issues instead of theological issues. Al-Faruqi argues that it would be difficult for dialogue to make progress with theological subjects as it involves the dimensions of faith and doctrines which are totally different from one faith to another and thus irreconcilable. In this regard, ethical questions are more feasible as they are considered less intimidating. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1998) also opines that theological issues will remain a major obstacle on the dialogue stage as many issues still remain contentious such as the question of incarnation and the Trinity in dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

Kamar Oniah (2001) refers to the conduct or etiquette of inter-religious dialogue as paradigms for dialogue: "the way we approach and conduct the dialogue should stimulate a sense of mutual concern and a spirit of togetherness, a sensitiveness to the needs of fellow human and creatures, a caring approach to universal needs of the universe" (Kamar Oniah, 2001: 117-118). In inter-religious dialogue, the topics or issues discussed cover various religious dimensions ranging from theology, doctrines and dogmas, rites, rituals and the attitudes of various religions towards specific issues. However, in inter-religious co-operation, the issues are unlimited provided the discussions are approached from the perspectives of participating religions. Kamar Oniah (2001) also outlined the ethics and etiquette of inter-religious dialogue and inter-religious cooperation. Among others, according to her, dialogue should not compromise the so called 'unchangeable quality' of religions especially those pertaining to the intra-personal dimension of religions which denotes faith (e.g. theology, articles of faith or rituals). The dialogue however, can involve the inter-personal dimension of religion that includes universal values such as "concern for justice, sympathy for the unfortunate and love for the family," which are more flexible and changeable (Kamar Oniah, 2001: 119). While engaging in dialogue, be it dialogue on religion or dialogue on co-operation, participants must be able to 'agree to disagree', to respect differences, to demonstrate decency, sincerity, sensitivity, responsibility, patience and other virtues (Kamar Oniah, 2001).

In guaranteeing an effective inter-religious dialogue Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2003), an expert on conflict resolution and dialogue for peace, has proposed four phases of dialogue development. In the first phase, during the initial contact among inter-religious groups, the main focus would be on finding similarities in theologies and scriptures. In order to further strengthen the relationship, he suggests that dialogue participants involve themselves in the

rituals and prayers of other faiths providing it is not contradictory to one's own creed. The differences in religious values and practices can only be explored when trust and understanding have been established among the dialogue participants. This should occur in the third phase.

The final phase is the exploration of ways to apply the values of different faith traditions for mutual benefit. Based on the above, it can be concluded that suspension of judgement, openness, and objectivity towards other religions without compromising one's own, has been identified as the most important methodology in dialogue and this methodology has been advocated by many scholars, contemporary, classical, Christian and Muslim alike.

Overview of Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia

Researchers (e.g., Rahimin Affandi, Mohd. Anuar, Paizah & Nor Hayati, 2011; Ghazali Basri, 2005; Suraya Sintang, Khadijah Mohd. Khambali, Azizan Baharuddin, Mahmud Ahmad, Mohd Roslan & Nurhanisah, 2012) have identified a few forms of inter-religious dialogue that have taken place in Malaysia with most of them acknowledging that Malaysian society is more synonymous with the 'dialogue of life' and social action instead of dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse.

Dialogue of Life

According to Rahimin Affandi et al. (2011), dialogue of life occurs whenever members of a community live together in a neighbourly and friendly spirit without the restrictions created by religious, cultural and ethnic differences. Shahrom TM Sulaiman (2004) likewise, identifies the everyday contact among people of different religions and ethnicities as part of dialogue. Dialogue of life occurs whenever people of different religious backgrounds come into contact and interaction takes place in residential areas, hospitals, schools, markets or workplaces. This dialogue is not limited to daily activities but can also be observed during festive seasons when this multi-religious and multi-ethnic society invites members of other faiths to their 'open houses' (Patricia Martinez, 2008).

Dialogue of Social Action

This form of dialogue refers to co-operative interaction among members of different religious groups such as when working on a project together, cooperating in charity programs and so on. (Shahrom TM Sulaiman, 2004). The dialogue of social action, also known as dialogue of collective action (Rahimin Affandi et al., 2011) can be seen in the efforts of some NGOs, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, in the fight for universal humanitarian issues related to the environment, consumerism, poverty, education, drug addiction, AIDS, globalization, democracy (Ahmad Sunawari, 2003), the improvement of familial quality, and the curbing of teenagers' misbehaviour and social ills (Suraya Sintang et al., 2012).

Dialogue in the Form of Intellectual Discourse

Inter-religious dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse has been practiced in Malaysia for quite some time. Ahmad Sunawari (2003) classified inter-religious dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse into the categories of bilateral, for example, Muslim-Christian dialogue, trilateral, for example, Muslim, Christian and Jewish dialogue, and multi-lateral, for example, dialogue among the Abrahamic faith. The awareness about the importance of good inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations is mirrored in the establishment of the earliest inter-religious organization in 1956 under the name of the Malaysia Inter-religious Organization (MIRO) with the noble mission of promoting mutual understanding and cooperation among all religions. Unfortunately, this organization ceased to exist when the 1969 riots broke out. Its role then was taken over by the National Unity Board, a government body chaired by the

late Tun V.T Sambanthan. Non-governmental organizations were represented by the Bishop's Institute of Inter-religious Affairs (BIIRA) after the May 1969 episode, and the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism was established in 1983 (Ghazali Basri, 2005).

3. Methodology

Design and Sampling

In order to gather information on the reality and nature of inter-religious relations in Malaysia, a survey was conducted. The survey covered the Klang Valley population. The sample size was determined by simple random sampling technique. Based on the formula and table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), for a population within the range of 250000 to 3000000000, the minimum required sample size is 384. Therefore, for the Klang Valley population (6082572), 400 respondents were selected. The quota sampling technique then was employed in which the respondents were divided proportionately based on religions (i.e. Islam, Buddha, Christian and Hindu). The quota number derived from the religious composition in Malaysia provided by Malaysia Demographics Profile 2019. Muslim (official) 61.3%, Buddhist 19.8%, Christian 9.2%, Hindu 6.3%, Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions 1.3%, other 0.4%, none 0.8%, unspecified 1% (2010 est.). The total number of participants therefore were 426 (Islam=275, Christian=54, Hindu=27 and Buddha=70).

In order to ensure the samples taken met the quota, the respondents were selected based on their affiliation in religious organizations. This is where purposive sampling was applied. There were 22 religious and ethnic based organizations selected in this study. The organizations are as follows:

Table 1: Religious-based Organizations

Organizations	Number
The Patriots Malaysia	15
Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia (MUAFAKAT)	20
Yayasan Dakwah Islamiyah Malaysia (YADIM)	30
Young Buddhist Association Malaysia (YBAM)	31
Persatuan Pengguna Islam Malaysia (PPIM)	20
Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia (BMSM)	39
Persatuan Malaysia Hindu Sangam	19
Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA)	20
Gabungan Pelajar Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung (GPMS)	20
Jaringan Melayu Malaysia (JMM)	17
Persatuan Institusi Tahfiz Al Quran Negeri Selangor (PITAS)	12
Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia (PKPIM)	19
Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia (IKRAM)	14
Persatuan Cina Muslim Malaysia (MACMA)	19
Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia (PERKIM)	20
UPM EKSEKUTIF (HINDU)	8
UPM STAFF	9
UPM EKSEKUTIF (ISLAM)	9
Christian Federation of Malaysia CFM	15
Institut Darul Ihsan (IDE)	31
National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF)	9
Kajang Church Members	30

Measures

The questionnaire consists of few measures including measures on religious composition in particular setting, subjects/themes in inter-religious dialogue, motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement, prejudice, quantity of contact, quality of contact and inter-religious understanding.

For religious composition, participants were asked to indicate the degree of religious diversity in specified settings in the format of a *Likert* scale of 1 to 5 (1=Not All Diverse, 2=Slightly Diverse, 3=Moderately Diverse, 4=Considerably Diverse and 5=Highly Diverse). For subjects or themes in inter-religious dialogue, the participants need to identify their feelings towards certain topics such as faith and god (own and others), religious festivals and their personal experiences living in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. The *Likert* scale ranked from 1 (extremely uncomfortable), 2 (uncomfortable), 3 (uncomfortable somewhat), 4 (neither uncomfortable nor comfortable), 5 (comfortable somewhat), 6 (comfortable) and 7 (extremely comfortable). There are 15 items for motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement measure which involved the participants' agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 7 =strongly agree). Among the items were "I find it hard to question opinions of people in other religious groups" and "Sharing stories and experiences of my religious group with others matters a lot to me."

Prejudice were also measured using *Likert* scale of 1 to 7 (1 = strongly disagree to 7 =strongly agree). Example of the statements were "Other religious groups are undermining my group religious culture" and "There are very few differences between the values (e.g. moral values, family values, work values) of other religious groups and my group." For the quantity of contact, the participants need to indicate the amount of time they have spent with members of various religious groups at particular settings such as neighborhood and workplace using *Likert* scale of 1 to 7 (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Occasionally, 4=Sometimes, 5=Frequently, 6=Usually and 7=Every time).

In order to measure quality of contact the participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements related to their experiences in interacting with people from other religions using *Likert* scale of 1 to 7 (1 = strongly disagree to 7 =strongly agree). Among the statements were "Had a meaningful and honest discussions about religious relations," Been put down, made or feel uncomfortable" and "Shared our personal feelings and problems."

For the inter-religious understanding measure, the participants were provided with 20 statements related to religious teachings, rites or rituals of major religions in Malaysia namely Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Chinese traditional religion, Hinduism and Sikhism. Some statements were constructed based on the actual fact while some others were constructed incorrectly. The participants need to indicate whether the statements listed are true, false or based on their knowledge on the religions. There were also an option "Do not know" if they do not have the knowledge on the given statements. The knowledge of the participants are measured based on the number of statements that were answered correctly. Among the statements were "Halal in Islam is applied to permissible food and drinks only," "Christians assemble for communal worship on Friday," "Buddhism originated in Ancient China," "Chinese ancestor worship is an aspect of the Chinese traditional religion," "In Hinduism, the cow is considered a sacred animal therefore it is considered a sin to kill a cow and eat its meat" and "The Sikhs were commanded to wear an iron bracelet called a Kirpan."

The survey data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. Descriptive analysis was performed in order to determine the frequencies and percentage for religious composition, subjects/themes in inter-religious dialogue and level of motivation, prejudice, quality of contact, quantity of contact and understanding. The inferential analysis was applied to examine the relationship between prejudice and selected factors (i.e. Quality of contact and motivation/skills) and relationship between motivation/skills and quality of contact.

4. Discussion

Table 2: Religious Composition in Particular Setting

Statement	Not All Diverse (1 Religion)	Slightly Diverse (2 Religions)	Moderately Diverse (3 Religions)	Considerably Diverse (4 Religions)	Highly Diverse (5 Religions And Above)
The neighbourhood where you grew up	72 16.9%	103 24.2%	125 29.3%	74 17.4%	52 12.2%
The school you graduated from	81 19%	77 18.1%	120 28.2%	85 20%	63 14.8%
College/university you are studying or graduated from	40 9.4%	52 12.2%	136 31.9%	110 25.8%	88 20.7%
Your current residential area	51 12%	88 20.7%	138 32.4%	98 23%	51 12%
Your workplace	164 38.5%	78 18.3%	98 23%	53 12.4%	33 7.7%

Table 2 indicates the level of religious diversity in particular settings. Based on the analysis, the level of religious diversity in most of the settings is moderate. Those settings are, the neighborhood where the respondents grew up, the school they graduated from, the college or university they are studying or graduated from and their current residential area. Unlike other settings, the workplace has been identified as the setting with the lowest level of diversity. The data on religious diversity in particular settings will inform researcher on the potential participants of inter-religious dialogue. In this case, the proposed model of inter-religious dialogue will be specifically designed to suit the nature of more mature participants instead of younger participants such as school or university students since they are already exposed with diversity at those settings. Even though the respondents reported moderately diverse at their current residential area, lack of religious diversity at the workplace needs attention since the amount of time spent at the workplace is greater than hours spent at the residential area.

Table 3: Subjects/Themes in Inter-Religious Dialogue

Statement	Extremely Uncomfortable (1)	Uncomfortable (2)	Uncomfortable Somewhat (3)	Neither Uncomfortable nor Comfortable (4)	Comfortable Somewhat (5)	Comfortable (6)	Extremely Comfortable (7)
Your faith and god	6 1.4%	11 2.6%	11 2.6%	38 8.9%	54 12.7%	150 35.2%	156 36.6%
Others faiths and gods	6 1.4%	11 2.6%	11 2.6%	38 8.9%	54 12.7%	150 35.2%	156 36.6%
Religious rights and equality	17 4%	25 5.9%	26 6.1%	72 16.9%	84 19.7%	124 29.1%	78 18.3%
Sensitive inter-religious issues and conflicts	20 4.7%	41 9.6%	77 18.1%	101 23.7%	80 18.8%	75 17.6%	32 7.5%
Religious rites and rituals	5 1.2%	21 4.9%	43 10.1%	92 21.6%	103 24.2%	103 24.2%	59 13.8%
Religious festivals	4 0.9%	9 2.1%	23 5.4%	59 13.8%	104 24.4%	154 36.2%	73 17.1%
Your culture and traditions	3 0.7%	9 2.1%	20 4.7%	41 9.6%	91 21.4%	155 36.4%	107 25.1%
Others cultures and traditions	7 1.6%	14 3.3%	19 4.5%	72 16.9%	119 27.9%	130 30.5%	65 15.3%
Leisure e.g. sports, foods, entertainments	1 0.2%	6 1.4%	19 4.5%	49 11.5%	83 19.5%	144 33.8%	124 29.1%
Social issues	3 0.7%	7 1.6%	25 5.9%	63 14.8%	101 23.7%	143 33.6%	84 19.7%
Political issues	4 0.9%	26 6.1%	51 12%	73 17.1%	100 23.5%	108 25.4%	64 15%
Economic issues	5	18	36	80	94	123	70

	1.2%	4.2%	8.5%	18.8%	22.1%	28.9%	16.4%
Your personal experiences of benefitting or suffering from particular policies, discrimination and privilege	8	19	63	121	82	97	36
	1.9%	4.5%	14.8%	28.4%	19.2%	22.8%	8.5%
Your personal experiences living in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society	6	5	20	67	124	146	58
	1.4%	1.2%	4.7%	15.7%	29.1%	34.3%	13.6%
family and work life	1	20	39	64	99	130	73
	0.2%	4.7%	9.2%	15%	23.2%	30.5%	17.1%

Based on the survey result, it was found that the respondents reported that they are extremely comfortable in discussing about their faith and god and others faiths and gods. On other subjects such as religious rights and equality, religious festivals, their culture and traditions, others cultures and traditions, leisure e.g. sports, foods, entertainments, social issues, political issues, economic issues, their personal experiences living in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society and family and work life, are considered as comfortable. Sensitive inter-religious issues and conflicts and their personal experiences of benefitting or suffering from particular policies, discrimination and privilege are among the topics that reflect reservations of the respondents since most of them stated “neither uncomfortable nor comfortable”. The respondents however were divided between comfortable somewhat and comfortable for the subject related to Religious rites and rituals. The information gained from the “Subjects/Themes in Inter-Religious Dialogue” is significant in identifying the most suitable content for inter-religious dialogue. The subjects/themes with the positive response such as extremely comfortable and comfortable will be considered as the main content for the dialogue.

Table 4: Level of Motivation, Prejudice, Quality & Quantity of Contact and Understanding

Domain	Low (1.00-4.00)	High (4.01-7.00)
Motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement	94 22.1%	332 77.9%
Prejudice	314 73.7%	112 26.3%
Quantity of contact	346 81.2%	80 18.8%
Quality of contact	83 19.5%	343 80.5%
Inter-religious understanding	141 33.1%	285 66.9%

The need and feasibility to carry out an inter-religious dialogue are based on the data gathered related to motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement, prejudice, quantity of contact, quality of contact and inter-religious understanding as shown in table 4. The finding reveals that the motivation and skills in dialogue among Malaysian is high (77.9%) which indicates the willingness and preparedness of Malaysian society to involve in inter-religious dialogue. Even though most of respondents demonstrate low level of prejudice (73.7%), we can never underestimate the 26.3% respondents with high level of prejudice. It is hoped that prejudice can be addressed through inter-religious dialogue. 81.2% respondents demonstrated low frequency of contact with people of different religious and ethnic background. Lack of contact among the grassroots serves as a strong justification to provide a platform such as inter-religious dialogue to increase interaction and engagement among the estranged groups. The result for quality of contact however displays otherwise in which the respondents experienced a high quality of contact despite limited number of inter-religious interaction (80.5%). Having basic knowledge about own and other religions and cultures is an advantage for the prospective participants of inter-religious dialogue in order to increase their confidence in interacting with others during dialogue. A relatively high level of understanding (66.9%) strengthened this prerequisite.

Table 5: Relationship between selected factors and prejudice

Factor	r	p
Motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement	-.329*	0.000
Quality of contact	-.487*	0.000

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 5 displayed the correlation between prejudice and selected factors (i.e. motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement and quality of contact). The Pearson correlation test result revealed that prejudice and all selected factors were significantly correlated. For the correlation between prejudice and motivation and skills, the correlation was $r=-0.329^*$, $p=0.000$. This result indicates that motivation and skills have a weak negative correlation with prejudice. The negative correlation means greater motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement are associated with lower level of prejudice while lack of motivation and skills signify the higher level of prejudice.

Quality of contact is moderately negative related to prejudice with $r=-.487^*$ and $p= 0.000$. This result also proves that contact with high quality will lead to lesser prejudice and contact with low quality rendered greater prejudice. The findings on negative correlation between prejudice and quality of contact is consistent with the existing proposition of contact theory which proposed that contact that occurs along with the four optimal contact conditions can reduce prejudice and bias (Allport, 1954).

The results on the correlation between prejudice and motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement also envisages the feasibility of inter-religious dialogue. Apart from being a platform to generate greater contact, inter-religious dialogue can also be a good platform to develop motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement for the participants. Both, contact and skills consequently will help to address prejudice and other negative attitudes among multi-religious Malaysian society.

Table 6: Relationship between quality of contact and motivation

Factor	r	p
Quality of contact	.428*	0.00

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 6 demonstrates the significant correlation between motivation and quality of contact, $r=0.428^*$, $p=0.000$. The result also reveals that correlation between motivation and quality of contact is moderately positive which means higher quality of contact is associated with greater motivation and skills while lower quality of contact is linked with lack of motivation and skills in inter-religious engagement. This findings suggest that high quality of contact can be supported with high level of motivation and skills.

5. Conclusion

The variables and the propositions identified from this preliminary survey is crucial for the development of the next phase of research. For instance, this survey has provided information on the target participants for dialogue i.e. those who are not exposed with religious diversity at the workplace. The next phase of study can focus on the design of dialogue that suit the nature for this type of participants. The data on the subject and themes of dialogue provides researcher with the information on the potential topic and content of dialogue. Most of participants for instance, demonstrated their hesitation towards subjects

related to sensitive inter-religious issues and conflicts. This type of topic will be omitted in designing the inter-religious dialogue model. This study also strengthened the need and feasibility to develop an inter-religious model for the grassroots. The low level of contact among multi-religious Malaysian society for instance is one of the reasons to promote inter-religious dialogue. The need to carry out dialogue is further supported with correlation between contact and prejudice. In order to address prejudice and improve inter-religious relations, the number of high quality contact must be increased and one of the platforms to achieve this goal is through inter-religious dialogue.

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