

Bridging The Muslim-Christian Relations Through Dialogue Of Life: Muslim Perspective

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Abstract—Dialogue in real life between different religious beliefs has become a necessity in pluralistic societies with different religious backgrounds. Community works and cooperations (Gotong Royong), celebrations and religious festivals, traditional open houses and weddings are examples of real life dialogues. Their uniqueness can be seen in harmonial relationship between Muslims and Christians in Sarawak. The aim of this paper is to explore on Muslim-Christian dialogue of life in a small community in Tebedu, Sarawak, Malaysia where Muslims live side by side with Christians of Bidayuh origins. Data were captured based on survey on 71 respondents out of 107 villagers and analysed using SPSS statistical software. The result from the study found that the concept of real life dialogues are yet to be fully understood and appreciated but people are already practising it with positive outcome.

Keywords: *dialogue of life, Muslim-Christian relationships*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sarawak represents a unique state having people of various and diverse ethnic backgrounds. Their harmonious and close cooperation has often become role model in every segment of the society, from the highest level to the man on the street. This proves that ethnic groups can live together in peace, helping each other with mutual respect yet they are from various races, cultures and religious backgrounds. To arrive at this level of peace and wealth sharing, real life dialogues play major role in building bridges and joining the inspirations of the people from diverse religious backgrounds.

II. DIALOGUE OF LIFE

This paper looks into dialogue of life between the Muslims and Christians of Bidayuh ethnic group in Kampung Darul Iman, Tebedu area in Sarawak, Malaysia. A dialogue is generally a discussion on a certain matter between two or more persons offering different concepts and opinions with primary objective that each party will benefit from the opposite party towards change or moving forward (Leonard Swidler, 2003). Starting from differences, dialogue has become a conduit in positive thinking with sincere efforts to know each other, to foster deeper understanding and ending with all parties gaining strengths from appreciating mutual goals and similarities and respecting each other's differences. The Holy Quran said in Surah Al-Hujurat (S49 verse 13):

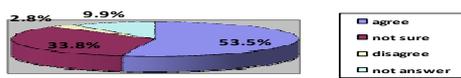
“O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa”.

The verse (ayat) begins by calling mankind in general without differentiating whether they are believers or not. He commanded that we mankind need to really and sincerely ‘know one another’. Allah emphasizes on the verb ‘lita’arafu’ (know one another) to explain that life goal can be reached by constant and free ‘dialogues’ with one another. In doing so man understands the wisdom of Allah in creating

mankind into various nations, tribes, ethnic backgrounds and beliefs. The principle of 'lita'arafu' is illustrated in details by Khadijah Mohd. Hambali@Khambali ,2004.

Although constant dialogues are often and generally understood as exchanges of information when discussing certain issues formally, dictated by fixed scope and agenda, we fail to recognise man on the street and the society actually practises real life dialogues through daily interactions and activities whether at various levels of individual, family, neighbourhood, friendship or official assignments. Such dialogues are referred to as Dialogue of Life (Mathieu Geijbels, 2000). The findings below are from a survey conducted on 71 respondents of Muslim faith. The objective of this study is to explore on dialogue of life practised by them. Specific questions are framed on the understanding, concept and practices of respondents' own experience of using real life dialogues as bridges to know one another living in a pluralistic society, under the following headings:

A. Understanding the Concept of Dialogue of Life



(Source: Questionnaire Survey 2009)

Figure 1. Understanding the Concept of Dialogue of Life

Referring to Chart 1, a total of 53.5% respondents agreed that they understood the concept of Dialogue of Life as compared to only 2.8% who disagreed. There were 33.8% of respondents who were in the 'not sure' group and 9.9% respondents did not submit any answer for this question.

B. Inter-Racial Unity Can Be Strengthened Through Dialogue of Life

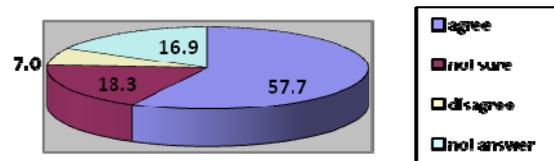


(Source: Questionnaire Survey 2009)

Figure 2. Inter-Racial Unity Can Be Strengthened Through Dialogue of Life

Chart 2 indicates 59.2% of respondents agreed with that inter-racial unity can be strengthened through Dialogue of Life as against 2.8% who did not agree. The 'not-sure' and those did not submit answers are 22.5% and 15.5% respectively.

C. Adjusted Well in Mixing with Non-Muslims

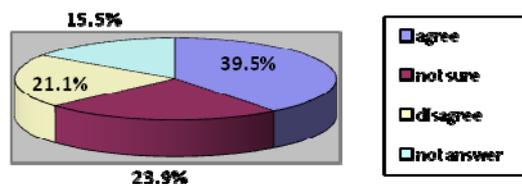


(Source: Questionnaire Survey 2009)

Figure 3. Adjusted Well in Mixing with Non-Muslims

Relating to whether they agreed they have adjusted well in mixing with non-Muslims living in the same village, Chart 3 indicates (57.7%) respondents agreed, only (7%) respondents disagreed. The 'not-sure' and those did not submit answers are (18.3%) people and (16.9%) respectively.

D. Willing and Ready to Discuss Religious Issues with Non-Muslim Friends

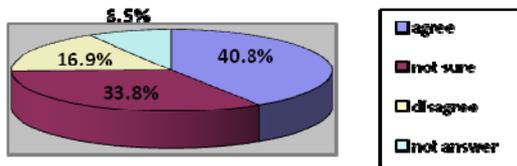


(Source: Questionnaire Survey 2009)

Figure 4. Willing and Ready to Discuss Religious Issues with Non-Muslim Friends

The above Chart 4 indicates respondents who were willing and ready to discuss religious issues with non-Muslim friends are 39.5% as compared with 21.1% who disagreed, 23.9% respondents are 'not-sure' group while 15.5% respondents did not provide any answer to this question.

E. Always Attend Gawai Open House Celebration



(Source: Questionnaire Survey 2009)

Figure 5. Always Attend Gawai Open House Celebration

Referring to Chart 5 above, 40.8% of respondents agreed that they always attended Gawai Open House Celebrations. This is compared with 16.9% who did not agree. A large percentage of 33.8% are of the 'not-sure' group while 8.5% of respondents did not answer this question.

F. Not Feeling Awkward to Stay in the Same House with Non-Muslims Family Members

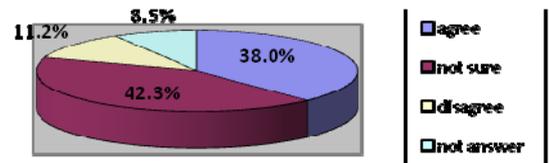


(Source: Questionnaire Survey 2009)

Figure 6. Not Feeling Awkward to Stay in the Same House with Non-Muslims Family Members

Based on Chart 6 above, it is observed that 39.4% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'they are not feeling awkward staying in the same house with non-Muslim family members'. 19.7% did not provide any answer to this question. Respondents were 'not-sure' and who disagreed are 28.8% and 12.7% respectively.

G. Always Attend Wedding Ceremonies/ Funerals of Friends/Family Members from Different Religious Backgrounds

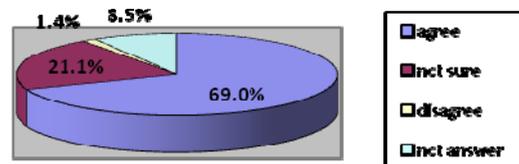


(Source: Questionnaire Survey 2009)

Figure 7. Always Attend Wedding Ceremonies/ Funerals of Friends/ Family Members from Different Religious Backgrounds

From Chart 7 above, 42.3% of respondents said they were 'not sure' on whether they always attended wedding ceremonies or funerals of friends or family members from different religious backgrounds. 38% agreed as compared to 11.2% who disagreed while 8.5% respondents did not provide any answer.

H. Always Feel Good Mixing with Non-Muslim Friends



(Source: Questionnaire Survey 2009)

Figure 8. Always Feel Good Mixing with non-Muslim Friends

From Chart 8 above, it is observed that a total of 69% respondents agreed with the statement that "it always feels good mixing with non-Muslim friends from the village". A total of 21.1% respondents were from the 'not-sure' group and 8.5% did not provide any answer while only 1.4% disagreed.

III. CONCLUSION

The findings to the eight (8) questions above all indicated the large majority of Muslims in the village used to mix, integrate and work together with members of the non-Muslim groups. They also respect their friends and family members who are from different religious backgrounds by

their readiness to attend weddings, funerals and Gawai Day Celebration. This survey found that there were also many respondents who did not understand the concept of what constituted Dialogue of Life despite already practising it in their everyday life. Dialogue of Life has already been established as accepted culture many generations ago, both by the Muslims and the Bidayuh Christians. In facing globalisation, Islam has often been labelled as ‘closed religion’ and this is not true. Malaysians have already inherited from their forefathers good seedlings of practising real life dialogues with their non-Muslim counterparts centuries ago in achieving a common goal of peace and harmony.

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