Design Consideration for Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia: The Incorporation of Contact Theory

Pertimbangan Rekabentuk Dialog Antara Agama di Malaysia: Penggabungan Teori Kontak

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Abstract: Inter-religious dialogue has been implemented in Malaysia by various organizations, be it Muslim's or Non-Muslim's organizations as early as 1950s. Often being carried out in the format of intellectual discourse and forum, its accessibility to the non-academician, non-scholars and non-elite is uncertain. If the inter-religious dialogue programs could not reach the grassroots, its effectiveness in addressing inter-religious issues that affected the grassroots is also doubtful. International dialogue practitioners has begun to include number of theories in their dialogue designs to reach out broader range of community. One of the theories is Contact Theory proposed by Gordon Allport aims at addressing in-group/out-group bias. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the application of Contact Theory in two models of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia (i.e. Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM) and Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF)). Case study research design was employed in order to identify the design of interreligious dialogue and the presence of Contact Theory within the two models. Data obtained through interviews and document analysis were then analysed using within-case and cross-case analysis. The finding suggest that IKIM's and INSaF's inter-religious dialogue models did not include any special session that allowed a real dialogue or cooperative interaction (one of important elements in Contact Theory) to take place among the participants. Without cooperative interaction among the participants, it would be difficult for these two models to reap the benefit of Contact Theory. Future research should focus on developing inter-religious dialogue design that is more appropriate for the grassroots with the inclusion of Contact Theory.

Keywords: *Inter-religious dialogue, grassroots, Contact Theory, interaction*

Abstrak: Dialog antara agama telah dilaksanakan di Malaysia oleh pelbagai organisasi, sama ada organisasi Muslim atau bukan Islam seawal tahun 1950-an. Selalunya dijalankan dalam format wacana intelektual dan forum, kebolehcapaiannya kepada warga bukan akademik, bukan sarjana dan bukan elit adalah tidak pasti. Sekiranya program dialog antara agama tidak dapat mencapai ke akar umbi, keberkesanannya dalam menangani isu-isu antara agama yang mempengaruhi akar umbi juga diragukan. Pengamal dialog antarabangsa telah mula memasukkan sejumlah teori dalam rancangan dialog mereka untuk menjangkau masyarakat yang lebih luas. Salah satu teori adalah Teori Kontak yang dikemukakan oleh Gordon Allport bertujuan menangani bias dalam kumpulan / antara-kumpulan. Oleh itu, kajian ini cuba mengkaji penerapan Teori Kontak dalam dua model dialog antara agama di Malaysia (iaitu Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM) dan Inter-Faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF). Reka bentuk kajian kes digunakan untuk mengenal pasti reka bentuk dialog antara agama dan kewujudan Teori Kontak dalam kedua-dua model tersebut. Data yang diperoleh melalui temu bual dan analisis dokumen dengan teknik

analisa dalam kes dan anatar kes. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa model dialog antara agama oleh IKIM dan INSaF tidak merangkumi sesi khas yang membolehkan dialog sebenar atau interaksi kerjasama (salah satu elemen penting dalam Teori Kontak) berlaku di antara para peserta. Tanpa interaksi kerjasama di antara para peserta, sukar bagi kedua-dua model ini untuk meraih keuntungan dari teori kontak ini. Penyelidikan masa depan harus difokuskan pada pengembangan rancangan dialog antara agama yang lebih tepat untuk akar umbi dengan memasukkan Teori Kontak.

Kata kunci: *dialog antara agama, akar umbi, teori kontak, interaksi*

Introduction

A number of researchers have identified 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.

According to Rahimin Affandi Rahimin Affandi, Mohd. Anuar, Paizah and Nor Hayati (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 refers to co-operative interaction among members of different religious groups such as when working on a project together, collaborating in charity programs and so on (Shahrom TM Sulaiman, 2004). Dialogue of social action or also known as dialogue of collective action (Rahimin Affandi et al., 2011) can also be seen in the efforts of some NGOs,' Muslim and non-Muslim alike, in their fight for universal humanitarian issues (e.g. environment, consumerism, poverty, education, drug addiction, AIDS, globalization and democracy (Ahmad Sunawari, 2003).

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.

A study by Khairulnizam Mat Karim and Suzy Aziziyana Saili (2008) explored the history of the implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia. It was found that inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia began as early as the 1950s as the World Council for Inter-Faith Co-operation was established in 1958. In 1963 it operated under the banner of the Malaysian Inter-Religious Organisation and was officially known as INSaF since 1986.

The actual implementation of inter-religious dialogue programs can be traced back in the early 1980s. It stemmed from disenchantment among the non-Muslim community towards the government's plan to inculcate more Islamic values in the public sphere. This idea was originally proposed by the fourth Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, as a response the growth of Islamic resurgence movements in Malaysia (Hussin Mutalib, 1990). This Islamic program supposedly championed the notion that moderate Islam in the context of the multi-cultural setting of Malaysia was the way to go (Yeoh, 2007). However, due to lack of information about the program, its content and implementation gave rise to adverse effects such as misunderstanding and protest among non-Muslims and this eventually led to dialogue (Khairulnizam Mat Karim & Suzy Aziziyana Saili, 2008).

Most of the earliest inter-religious dialogue efforts were conducted and dominated by non-Muslim organizations and leaders while some Muslim organizations were involved only as participants. For example, in October 1980, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) (Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement) sent its members for an inter-religious seminar organized by the Young Men's Christian Organization (YMCA) with the Partners of People of Other Faiths. The Consumer Association of Penang

(CAP) and ALIRAN were other Muslim organizations that were involved in inter-religious dialogue (Ghazali Basri, 2005). During the 1990s a real breakthrough for the practice of inter-religious dialogue took place when the University of Malaya, as a representative of Muslim organizations, made the bold move of initiating the "International Seminar on Islam and Confucianism" in March 1995. This dialogue program was very well received by the non-Muslims especially the Chinese community of Malaysia and this led to growing interest and a more positive perception of Islam from this community (Osman Bakar, 2008).

Literature Review

The Reality of the Implementation of Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia

Although inter-religious dialogue in the form of 'dialogue of life' and 'dialogue of social action' are believed to have deep historical roots in Malaysia and synonymous with Malaysian society, inter-religious dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse on the other hand is still in its initial stage and in reality it does not reflect the ideal model for inter-religious dialogue. Poor participation from the Muslim community in general, and Islamic organizations in particular, when compared to non-Muslim organizations, does not reflect the same spirit as demonstrated in 'dialogue of life' and 'dialogue of social action.' For this reason, Ghazali Basri (2005) asserts that 'dialogue of life' or 'dialogue of social action' such as the 'open house' concept during festive seasons, is mostly superficial in nature. Therefore, he underscores that inter-religious dialogue in its real sense is still new to Malaysian society.

Although many inter-religious dialogues have been conducted by NGOs, they were nothing more than a regular encounter of minds among diverse groups which consequently produced no concrete results. It can be concluded that real inter-religious dialogue has not yet begun (Rohaini, Ayu, Horazilah & Norazlina, 2011). The less than encouraging participation and passive implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia is supposedly influenced by the nature of the dialogue itself which is considered highly intellectual. Ghazali Basri (2005) for instance describes inter-religious dialogue as an intellectual discourse that involves the meeting of religious representatives which is not suitable for the masses due to its content which revolves around philosophical and theological issues. According to Rahimin Affandi et al. (2011), the implementation of dialogue in the form of

intellectual discourse is still limited in this country given that, this type of dialogue is only organized at higher education institutions or religious institutions like Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM) (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia). This limitation is due to the nature of the dialogue itself which requires the participants to fulfil certain conditions such as the fact that they must be knowledgeable and well-versed in religious and textual study regarding the sacred scriptures of other religions.

A collective case study conducted by Arfah and Wan Sabri (2012), reveals four types of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia (i.e., collective inquiry, critical-dialogic education, community building and social action and; conflict resolution and peace building). An inter-religious dialogue forum entitled "The Concept of God" organized by Students Representative Council of Malaysia Science University (Health Campus) in 2008 was an example of critical-dialogic education while Center for Civilizational Dialogue closed dialogue program in 2008 (Inter-religious Dialogue on Current Issues) was identified as conflict resolution and peace building. INSaF's Hari Raya Celebration and Religious Harmony Workshop in 2010 best fit the community building and social action type while INSaF's monthly meeting was part of collective inquiry (Arfah & Wan Sabri, 2012).

More recent case study on the existing framework of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia was carried out by Suraya (2019). This research has identified several organizations that actively involved in inter-religious engagement. Among the organizations are *Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam* (PERKIM) and Quranic Youth Club (QYC) of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). As a dakwah organization, *Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam* (PERKIM) for instance uses two main approaches in its inter-religious engagement (i.e., education and welfare). In order to address certain inter-religious issues, QYC has developed special module and programs such as forum, research, training of trainee, street dakwah and many more (Suraya, 2019).

Contact Theory: The Guide for Diversity Programs and Inter-Group Dialogue

In implementing diversity or multi-cultural programs including dialogue, most of college campuses in the United States are guided by a theory known as inter-group contact theory proposed by Gordon Allport (1954). This theory suggests that inter-group contact will result in positive effects with the presence of four

key conditions namely equal group status within the group encounter, common goals, co-operative interactions and support from those with social influence and power.

The efficacy of inter-group contact in reducing prejudice has been proven by numerous researches conducted to assess its impact. Gaertner, Dovidio and Bachman (1996: 27) for instance reveal that inter-group contact that fosters opportunities for "self-revealing interactions" has been shown to facilitate superordinate identity formation and reduce bias. The influence of inter-group contact in reducing inter-group prejudice has also been proven by a meta-analytic test that 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).

In 2008, Nagda, Gurin and Zúñiga had conducted an experiment on the application of Contact Theory in inter-group dialogue. This multi-university study examined the outcomes of race and gender inter-group dialogues for student populations. In this study, inter-group dialogues were purposely designed to create the conditions that Allport outlined for positive inter-group contact. The enrolment of an equal number of students from each identity group reflects the equal status condition. Co-operation and personal interaction are guaranteed by exercises and assignments that require students to work together and to get to know each other in non-superficial ways. Since these courses are made compulsory for earning college credit, it becomes an evident for support from authorities. Inter-group dialogue therefore, is a platform for structured and facilitated contact to occur. This consequently will lead to a reduction of prejudice among the participants.

Students involved in inter-group dialogue were reported to have more positive views of conflict and declared greater support for multi-cultural and affirmative action policies compared to the other students that did not participate (Gurin, Peng, Lopez, & Nagda, 1999). Among the results from dialogues in community and international settings are breakdown of stereotyping, facilitation of personal relationships, establishment of trust and consensus building leading to critical social policy development, and commitment to social change (Alvarez & Cabbil, 2001).

Based on the aforementioned discussion, inter-group dialogue that applied contact theory has more potential to achieve the most desired outcomes of dialogue namely reducing prejudice and improving impaired inter-group relations. This practice is totally different with the practice of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia that is considered as intellectual in nature. If

this is the nature of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia, its accessibility to the grassroots especially those who are non-academician, non-scholars and non-elite is questionable. If the dialogue cannot be accessed by the grassroots, how is it possible for the dialogue to address inter-religious issues that affect that group? This study therefore attempts to explore the existing design of inter-religious dialogue models that had been implemented in Malaysia and examining the application of contact theory in those models.

Research Methodology

In order to examine the design of inter-religious dialogue models including the presence of contact theory, case study which involved interview and document analysis was carried out. Among the organizations selected for this research were Institut Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (IKIM) and Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF). These two organizations were selected based on criterion sampling technique (i.e., one of purposive sampling techniques) which involves the search for cases that fulfil certain criterion (Pattom, 1990). IKIM and INSaf were selected since these two organizations met the criterion pre-defined by the researcher. (i.e., the involvement or experience of the organizations in implementing inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia).

This qualitative data then was analyzed using within-case analysis and cross-case analysis as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Within-case analysis compares the data against the theory applied (in this case inter-group dialogue design and Contact Theory), while cross-case analysis compares data in one case to data in the other case (which means data on the design in one organization will be compared with data in the other organization).

Results And Discussion

The Design of Inter-Religious Dialogue Models: Institut Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Ikim) and Inter-Faith Spiritual Fellowship (Insaf).

Institut Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (IKIM)

"Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The Muhibah (Affability) Perspective" was an example of IKIM's critical-dialogic education dialogue with an intellectual discourse format. This intellectual discourse was held on November 2, 2010 (Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia [IKIM], 2010). This program focused on enhancing inter-religious

understanding and harmonious living in a pluralistic society. This one day program comprised a presentation session by an invited speaker (i.e. Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman), and a discussion session participated by three discussants (i.e. Thomas Philips the President of MCCBCHST; Prematilaka KD Sarisena the Hon. Secretary-General of MCCBCHST; and Mohd Sani Badron the Director of Centre for Economics and Social Studies, IKIM). The moderator for the program was the late Ilani Isahak. It began at 10 am after welcoming remarks by Nik Mustapha bin Haji Nik Hassan, IKIM's Director-General and ended at 12.40 pm. Most of IKIM's dialogue programs including this one normally adopted themes that are related to universal values instead of theological and philosophical themes. A summary of the above analysis on IKIM's dialogue design can be found in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. IKIM's Dialogue Design

Design	
Theme/topic	Universal values e.g. "Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The *Muhibah* Perspective"
Setting	NA
Participant	Experts and leaders
Moderator/speaker	1 moderator, 1 speaker and 3 three discussants
Format	Intellectual discourse
Duration	Half day (9.30 a.m. to 12.40 p.m. on November 2, 2010)
Ground rules	NA
Evaluation	NA
Activities	None

Note. NA= Not available

Inter-Faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSAF)

In 2006, INSaF organized inter-religious dialogue entitled "Karma, Faith and Divinity." This dialogue took place at the multi-purpose hall of the Pure Life Society. The public who interested to participate in this dialogue were encouraged to register themselves in advance so as to arrange for light high-tea at the end of the program. This special session was arranged to foster more meaningful engagement among participants. The program that took the format of a forum invited three speakers to present their ideas on

the given topic. The presentation was followed by a dialogue session with the audience. The three speakers invited representing different religions for example B.K. Letchumanan representing Hinduism, Rufus Bruno Pereira representing Christianity and Shah Kirit Kalkulal Govindji representing Islam. This one day program was chaired by Goh Chooi Chin (The Pure Life Society [PLS], 2006). Table 1.2 is the summary for INSaF dialogue design.

Table 1.2 INSaF's Dialogue Design

Design	
Theme/topic	Theological/general (e.g., Karma, Faith and Divinity)
Setting	Multi-purpose hall at the Pure Life Society
Participant	Public (mostly non-Muslim)
Moderator/speaker	2-3 speakers with 1 moderator
Format	Seminar
Duration	1 day
Ground rules	NA
Evaluation	NA
Activities	Hi-tea to encourage interaction

Note. NA= Not available

The Insertion of Inter-Group Contact Theory in Inter-Religious Dialogue

Based on the analysis of the inter-religious dialogue design, it was found that current models of dialogue did not incorporate any special session that allowed a dialogue or other activities to take place among the participants in general. This simply means, current models of dialogue did not fulfil one important element in Contact Theory (i.e. cooperative interaction). Even though these two organizations without doubt had met the other three contact conditions such as equal status, common goals and authority sanction, however lack one condition renders its ineffectiveness since all four conditions must co-exist in order for it to demonstrate the positive effect (Gaertner, Dovidio, Rust, Nier, Banker & Ward, 1999).

Equal status is guaranteed by IKIM and INSaF with the selection of speakers and participants with comparable status in terms of expertise, knowledge, position and so on for inter-religious dialogue programs conducted by organizations. IKIM

for instance invited experts, academicians and religious leaders for its program entitled "Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The Muhibah Perspective." This dialogue invited a speaker (Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman from International Islamic University Malaysia) and three discussants (Thomas Philips, the President of MCCBCHST, Prematilaka KD Sarisena, the Hon. Secretary-General of MCCBCHST and Mohd Sani Badron, the Director of Centre for Economic and Social Studies, IKIM). Most participants who attended inter-religious dialogues with the critical-dialogic education type such as those organized by IKIM and INSaF were keen on gaining knowledge about different religious perspectives on certain religious issues. For example, they wanted more information on the issue of "Karma, Faith and Divinity" as addressed by INSaF in 2006. This reflect the 'common goals' contact condition. The freedom to implement inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia is consistent with the condition of 'authority sanction' in which most organizations did not confront any constraints posed by the authorities.

Conclusion

Even though the organizations involved in this study successfully met the other three contact conditions namely, equal status, common goals and support from authority, the missing component (i.e. co-operation), will affect the effectiveness of the contact theory. According to Chu and Griffey (1985) one factor will become less important when it is isolated from the other. For instance, common goals are one of the valuable factors, but it becomes less effective if it is detached from cooperative interaction and other factors (Gaertner, Dovidio, Rust, Nier, Banker, Ward, et al., 1999). In order to ensure that all four contact conditions being achieved, current models of inter-religious dialogue should develop a design that is more conducive for cooperative interaction to occur and not only depending on the format of seminar, forum or public lecture.

The inter-group dialogue framework offers a few examples of activities that reflect the key conditions of the inter-group contact theory especially co-operative interaction such as group-building activities, cultural chest activities, terminology activities (to generate meaning about key terms) and many more that require the participants to work together and get to know each other better (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). The new design of inter-religious dialogue therefore, need some variation and creativity in the format adopted, not simply relying on the seminar, forum or public lecture

formats. INSaF inter-religious dialogue program ("Karma, Faith and Divinity") however had shown some effort in encouraging more interaction among the participants by arranging a high-tea session at the end of the dialogue program. Even though this kind of activity might not lead to co-operation, at least this could be a good example of non-typical dialogue program.

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