

Inter-Religious Engagement in Malaysia: The Muftis' Views

Penglibatan Antara Agama: Pandangan Para Mufti

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Abstract: Islam has endorsed few ethics in dealing with the non-Muslims that reflect tolerance and compassion instead of prejudice and aversion. These ethics can be found in few Quranic verses such as verse 125 from surah *al-Nahl*, verse 34 from surah *Fussilat* and many more. It is crucial to be adopted in religiously and culturally diverse country like Malaysia. However, there are still few Muslims exhibit their antipathy and exclusive attitudes towards the non-Muslim, which hinders from Islam. This study attempts to explore muftis' views on the issue of inter-religious engagement and attitudes towards the non-Muslims in Malaysia. The muftis are chosen because due to their role in the state-level religious bureaucracy and whose opinions will have a great influence on Muslims in general and three of them was a concerned in this study. Phenomenological research design was adopted for this study with in depth-interview as the main instrument. The finding suggests that all muftis demonstrate their tolerance and inclusive attitude towards the non-Muslim and they have proposed few methods in inter-religious engagement such as education, *akhlaq* and inter-religious dialogue. The recommendations made envisaged to influence the Muslims attitude. Future research therefore should focus on the reality of inter-religious engagement among the grassroots in general.

Keywords: Mufti, Malaysia, tolerance, inter-religious engagement

Abstrak: Islam telah menganjurkan beberapa etika dalam berurusan dengan orang bukan Islam yang mencerminkan toleransi dan belas kasihan. Etika ini boleh didapati daripada beberapa ayat Al-Quran antaranya ayat 125 surah *al-Nahl*, ayat 34 surah *Fussilat* dan banyak lagi. Etika ini amat penting dalam negara yang pelbagai agama dan budaya seperti Malaysia. Namun, masih terdapat umat Islam yang mempamerkan antipati dan sikap eksklusif mereka terhadap orang bukan Islam yang menjauhkan orang daripada Islam. Kajian ini cuba mencari beberapa pandangan mufti mengenai isu antara agama dan sikap terhadap orang bukan Islam di Malaysia. Mufti dipilih kerana mereka adalah utama dalam birokrasi agama peringkat negeri dan mempunyai pengaruh yang besar terhadap umat Islam umumnya, dan tiga mufti negeri terlibat dalam kajian ini. Reka bentuk penyelidikan fenomenologi digunakan dengan wawancara sebagai instrumen utama. Kajian menemukan semua mufti menunjukkan toleransi dan sikap inklusif terhadap orang bukan Islam dan mereka mencadangkan beberapa kaedah dalam penglibatan antara agama, antaranya ialah pendidikan, *akhlaq* dan dialog antara agama. Cadangan-cadangan ini dijangka akan mempengaruhi sikap umat Islam dalam penglibatan antara agama. Oleh itu, penyelidikan masa depan harus menumpukan kepada realiti antara agama dalam kalangan akar umbi secara umum.

Kata kunci: Mufti, Malaysia, toleransi, dialog antara agama

Introduction

Islam has endorsed few ethics in dealing with the non-Muslims that reflect tolerance and compassion instead of prejudice and aversion. These ethics can be found in few Quranic verses such as verse 125 (surah *al-Nahl*), verse 34 (surah *Fussilat*), verse 43-44 (surah *Taha*) and verse 46 (surah *Al-Ankabut*).

Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance (*Al-Nahl*: 125).

Nor can goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: Then will he between whom and thee was hatred become, as it were thy friend and intimate (*Fussilat*: 34)

Go, both of you, unto Pharaoh. Lo! He hath transgressed (the bounds). And speak unto him a gentle word, that peradventure he may heed or fear (*Taha*: 43-44).

And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, 'We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam).'

(*Al-Ankabut*: 46)

These verses promoting wisdom, beautiful preaching and gentle words in the engagement with the non-Muslims. The gentle words and kind approach are not only applied to the moderate and accommodative non-Muslim but they are also applied to the extreme opponents of Islam and those who 'transgressed the bounds' like Pharaoh as stated in verse 43-44 in surah *Taha*. These kinds of ethics are crucial be adopted in religiously and culturally diverse country like Malaysia. Unfortunately, despite these Islamic endorsements, there are few issues related to inter-religious relations revealing the hostile and exclusive attitudes of some Muslims in Malaysia. For instance, the issue of *kalimah* Allah, cow head protests, Muslims-only laundrette and child custody for cases that involved Muslim and non-Muslim spouse. These discouraging attitudes could repel the non-Muslim from Islam instead of attracting them to Islam.

This study therefore attempts to explore the views of the muftis on the issue of inter-religious

engagement and their attitudes towards the non-Muslims in Malaysia. The muftis chosen in this study because they are the key person in the state-level religious bureaucracy whose opinions will have a great influence in the decision-making on religious issues in particular and on Muslims in general.

Phenomenological research design used for this study with in depth-interview as the main instrument. Among the muftis that had been interviewed were the Penang Mufti (Datuk Dr. Wan Salim Wan Mohd Nor), Federal Territories Mufti (Datuk Dr. Zulkifli Mohamad Albakri) and Melaka Mufti (Dato' Haji Abdul Halim Tawil). All the muftis were still in service during the interview sessions conducted from 2016 to 2017.

Methods in inter-religious engagement

The finding suggests that all muftis interviewed demonstrate their tolerance and inclusive attitudes towards the non-Muslim since they believe these attitudes will bring benefits to Islamic *da'wah* and not closeness and exclusivity. Their tolerance and inclusive attitudes are demonstrated through few methods in inter-religious engagement that they have proposed. Among the methods are education, *akhlaq* and inter-religious dialogue.

Education

All muftis interviewed hold that education especially the formal education is the main principle in disseminating the correct understanding of Islam and consequently reducing fear and prejudice among the non-Muslim. Both the Penang and Federal Territories muftis for instance hold that the hostility shown by the non-Muslims towards Islam was caused by their misunderstanding of the religion (Penang Mufti, personal communication, October 25, 2016).

The Penang Mufti compares the acceptance of the non-Muslims of the Islamic banking system and *hudud*. According to him, the non-Muslims were more open to Islamic banking and finance once they understood the importance and profit that they could gain out of it, while their resistance towards *hudud* was due not only to lack of understanding but also misunderstanding of the law (Penang Mufti, personal communication, October 25, 2016).

The Penang Mufti's view is consistent with a research finding conducted by Zatul Himmah Adnan (2013) on Islamization policy in Malaysia. The finding suggests that the non-Muslims are more

receptive in the areas of Islamic education and Islamic banking since these areas apparently will bring them some kind of personal or moral benefit to them. Their attitudes however are different in other two areas i.e. *shari'ah* and public services and Islamic bureaucracy since these two areas are seen as having more negative impact on them that led to their rejection. For instance, the non-Muslims felt discriminated whenever some of legal issues such as burial rights and child custody for cases that involving Muslim's spouse were solved under *shari'ah* courts.

The correct information on Islam through education is very important in order to avoid any misunderstanding towards Islam that will impede the Islamic *da'wah* to the non-Muslims. The spirit of education is also emphasized by the Federal Territories Mufti. According to him, Islam came to educate (*ta'dib*) and not to punish (*ta'zib*). Education should also supersede punishment including the case of religious insult (Federal Territories Mufti, personal communication, October 6, 2016).

Akhlaq

Akhlaq is another method in inter-religious engagement that has been proposed by the muftis. The Federal Territories Mufti, for example, highlights that Muslims should display their *akhlaq* in their engagement with the non-Muslims. The *akhlaq* is important even when dealing with sensitive and provocative inter-religious issues. He adds that, the Prophet's (Peace be upon him) *akhlaq* is the key to *da'wah* that attracted non-Muslims to Islam during his era (Federal Territories Mufti, personal communication, October 6, 2016).

The reservations shown by some Muslims when it comes to non-Muslim's affairs and rights cannot be considered as part of Islamic *akhlaq*. This issue was raised by the Melaka Mufti. He gives an example of a Muslim's officer who shown his hesitation whenever he had to be part of a marriage registration processes that took place in a church. Another example he gives related to Muslim authorities at the Melaka Land Registry who were reluctant to approve an application to build a temple by a Buddhist organization. These attitudes, according to the Melaka Mufti, are a threat to the freedom of religion in this country. A Muslim authority should be fair to all in terms of religious rights. These actions and incidents, according to him, are an obvious threat to inclusive, moderate and just Islamic values (Melaka Mufti, personal communication, November 22, 2016).

Inter-religious dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue is also one of the methods proposed by the muftis in preserving good inter-religious engagement. The Penang Mufti for instance, had the opportunity to engage in informal inter-religious dialogue during a program known as '*rahmah li-l-'alamin.*' Even though the program was not originally conducted as a dialogue program, but since the participants are multi-religious in nature, therefore it also allowed a dialogue to occur. According to the Penang Muftis, few *shari'ah* issues that often lead to misunderstanding were discussed during the dialogue for example the rights of women in Islam (Penang Mufti, personal communication, October 25, 2016).

The effort in inter-religious dialogue by the Federal Territories Mufti is evident in few visits from inter-religious groups to the mufti's office. He also acknowledges the efforts by the government in inter-religious dialogue carried out by the government bodies such as Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM) (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia), JAKIM and other inter-religious and inter-ethnic councils. However, these efforts need to be intensified and the methods of the dialogue need to be varied not only restricted to sports and culture. This is to attract more participants especially the marginalized and reserved groups. The Federal Territories Mufti believes that inter-religious dialogue approaches are part of *Fiqh At-Ta'ayyush* (the way or the understanding of how to live with other faiths and cultures). According to him, The Federal Territories Mufti's office is always open for visits from all religious groups. For example, the office has been visited by Christian, Hindu and Buddhist leaders and groups (Federal Territories Mufti, personal communication, October 6, 2016).

According to The Melaka Mufti, dialogue as part of the Islamic tradition can be one of the means to demonstrate the concept of tolerance or *tasamuh* as the Melaka Mufti calls it. The concept of 'for you is your religion, and for me is my religion' as stated in the Qur'an (*Al-Kafirun*: 6) should be treated wisely, not to the extent of rigidity and creating a wall between Muslims and non-Muslims (Melaka Mufti, personal communication, November 22, 2016).

The doctrinal base of dialogue is enshrined in few verses in the Qur'an as aforementioned for instance verses such as verse 125 (surah *al-Nahl*), verse 34 (surah *Fussilat*), verse 43-44 (surah *Taha*) and verse 46 (surah *Al-'Ankabut*). Dialogue with the

other faiths is integral to Islamic teachings as demonstrated in the Holy Qur'an whenever Muslims are guided to use certain dialogue ethics such as wisdom, beautiful preaching and gentle words in dealing with the non-Muslims.

The Penang Mufti puts emphasis on the moral content of dialogue that becomes the common ground for all religions instead of content on faith or *'aqidah*. He however did not specify the example of the moral values that could be discussed in the dialogue (Penang Mufti, personal communication, October 25, 2016). The Melaka Mufti also asserts that dialogue should focus on current and universal issues, for instance patriotism and love for the country, instead of theological matters (Melaka Mufti, personal communication, November 22, 2016).

This idea is consistent with one of the principles of inter-religious dialogue as outlined by al-Faruqi. He postulated that inter-religious dialogue would be successful if it is carried out in the field of ethical and social issues instead of theological issues. According to him, theological subjects involve the dimensions of faith and doctrines which are very different from one faith to another, and irreconcilable hence would hinder the progress of dialogue (Fletcher 2008).

Conclusion

Islam has laid down few ethics or principles in engagement with the non-Muslims as can be found in few Quranic verses. The verses suggest a wise and gentle approach in dealing with the non-Muslims including the extreme opponents and transgressor like Pharaoh. As the Quran has laid down the ethics for dialogue, the muftis have further refined the inter-religious approach with few methods such as education, *akhlaq* and dialogue.

Without education and proper understanding on Islam, the non-Muslims will never explore the beauty and mercy of Islam that can be shed upon the whole creation. *Akhlaq* is also important in inter-religious engagement, as bad attitudes portrayed by the Muslims will create the prejudice among the non-Muslims. Finally, yet importantly, inter-religious dialogue is one of the platforms in which the education on Islam can be convey and *akhlaq* can be exhibit. Based on the discussion, it is obvious that the muftis' spirit for Islamic *da'wah* has led to their tolerance and inclusiveness. They believe that exclusive attitudes and unfair treatments to the non-Muslims will keep them away from Islam.

This Islamic spirit should be adopted by Muslims in general to make Islamic *da'wah* more effective. The attitudes and behaviours of a handful of Muslims apparently are unjust to Islam as they make the religion perceived as a tyrannical and an exclusive religion. Future research therefore should focus on the attitudes of the Muslim's grassroots towards inter-religious engagement.

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