Reconstruction of Religious Pluralism or *Muhibah* Value? A Comparative Study in Malaysia

Rekonstruksi Faham Pluralisme Agama atau Muhibah? Satu Kajian Perbandingan di Malaysia

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Abstract: Nielson (1992) affirms that "the pluralistic arrangement" has proven to be a source of socio-political tension rather than a solution. A number of prominent social scientists in the West have yet to suggest that the idea of religious pluralism, is the best way of dealing with diversity, together with its essential values. However, the situation in Malaysia has shown a different scenario. This paper will look into those elements proposed by the Western scholars to be the overriding values of religious pluralism in maintaining a harmonious living among people of different religions. In doing so, this paper will present the ideas of the Malaysian scholars of what they understood as the essence of "majmuk" or living in a plural society as a response to the Western idea of religious pluralism. This will highlight one of the objectives of this paper which is to present selected writings and opinions of Muslims and Christians social scientists in Malaysia on the discourse of religious pluralism. The study has undergone a series of interview to Muslim and Christian scholars. Based on the findings, it is noted that some scholars proved that religious pluralism discourse in Malaysia is contestable. This is due to its link to the Western modern philosophy and secularism. Finally, it also consults meaningful recommendations given by the scholars in facing the challenges of living together as one family in "Muhibah".

Keywords: Religious pluralism, *Muhibah*, plural society, Malaysia.

Abstrak: Neilson (1992) pernah menyatakan bahawa kepelbagaian dalam kehidupan telah terbukti menjadi punca ketegangan dalam socio-politik daripada penyelesaian. Oleh itu, ramai pengkaji telah berpendapat bahawa fahaman pluralisme agama, adalah jalan keluar yang terbaik untuk menangani kepelbagaian. Senario di Malaysia telah membuktikan sebaliknya. Kertas kerja ini akan meneliti sudut pandang Barat dalam memahami idea pluralisme agama dalam mengekalkan keharmonian dalam masyarakat yang berbilang agama. Selain itu, kertas kerja akan menjelaskan pandangan sarjana Muslim Malaysia berkaitan konsep hidup dalam kepelbagaian masyarakat "majmuk" sebagai satu respon balas kepada idea pluralisme agama di barat. Ini juga akan menjelaskan satu daripada objektik kajian iaitu untuk mempersembahkan beberapan penulisan dan pandangan saintis sosial Muslim dan Kristian terhadap wacana pluralisme agama di Malaysia. Kajian ini juga telah menjalankan satu seri temubual dengan sarjana Muslim dan Kristian. Hasil kajian telah mendapati bahawa ramai sarjana di Malaysia tidak bersetuju dengan faham pluralisme agama dan menyifatkan ia sebagai membawa pertikaian di atas pertalian fahaman ini dengan falsafah Barat dan

idea sekularisme. Akhir sekali, ia juga akan turut membincangkan pandangan membina dalam mendepani cabaran hidup bersama sebagai satu keluarga dalam suasana "Muhibah".

Katakunci: Pluralisme agama, masyarakat plural, Malaysia.

Introduction

"Religious plurality" and "religious pluralism"1 constitute two different terms that are used interchangeably by many Muslim and Christian scholars. The term "plurality of religions" commonly refers to the existence of various religious denominations in a society which has no pervasive impact at all since all organized religions in general acknowledge the existence of other organized religions. However, the term "religious pluralism" was coined by Ernst Troeltsch (1980), a liberal Christian theologian (1865- 1923) who established the idea that all religions, including Christianity, always contain an element of truth, and none has the absolute truth, and the concept of God in this world is plural and not singular (p.31). The term "religious pluralism" was introduced in the 20th century to encounter religious intolerance, particularly the inclusive view of Christianity. It was then spread by a group of scholars who attempted to bring forth the Perennial Philosophy in the 1940s such as Rene Guenon (1886-1951) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) later established by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) in his De *L`unité Trancendante Des Religions* (*Transcendent Unity of Religions)* which was first published in France in 1948. John Hick promoted this idea in his writings such as in his *God has Many Names* (1980) and *Disputed Questions of Religious Truth* (1993). A similar view was shared by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) in his *Questions of Religious Truth* (1967) and *Towards a World Theology* (1981).

Methodology

The method used in this study consists of two. First, the data collected were taken from literature as to present the Western contemporary discourse of the term. This has been done by listing down important discussion by several scholars in the field. Second, qualitative method is also consulted whereby a series of interviews have been carried to both Muslim and Christian representatives in Malaysia consisting of six members, three from the Christian and another three from the Muslim scholars. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, the interviews were conducted in the form of individual conversations. These non-structured interviews contained open-ended questions organized in three sections; 1. The Characteristics of Religious Pluralism, 2. The Background in Malaysia, 3. The Impacts on Muslim and Christians in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Both terms have been used interchangeably by many scholars in the study of multi-beliefs and diversity living. In fact, there exists the tendency to equate the meaning of "religious pluralism" with "plurality of religions" which significantly differs from the theological and philosophical contexts. Albeit loose connotation of the terms, Peter Byrne in his *Prolegomena of Religious Pluralism* clearly affirms the difference between them when he puts forth that;

Pluralism is one intellectual response to that fact of religious diversity. The starting point in discussion of pluralism is then the fact that there are many religious traditions in human history and they exhibit diversity. Many facets of this diversity are not primary interest to pluralism. As a thesis in the philosophy of religion, pluralism's first focus is on the fact that religions implicitly or explicitly claim cognitive success and achievements of various kinds. Thus, they claim to have a true account of the nature of transcendent, sacred reality, or human nature, or of how human salvation and liberation from evil is to be achieved (Byrne , 1995, p.1).

Based on this definition, it is clear to some scholars that diversity is not merely the focus of religious pluralism. It deals primarily with the notion of religious truth-claims of each religion and eradicates, to some extent, the authenticity of one religion to salvation. This is true when Byrne laid down five important characteristics that constitute the meaning of "religious pluralism". There are at least five characteristics of "religious pluralism": 1. It is a response that eradicates the sense of uniqueness and absoluteness of any particular religion. 2. It affirms the truth shared by all religions of the world. 3. It focuses on the aspect of salvation, affirming that all religions contain the element of salvation. 4. It concentrates on religious experience asserting that all religions are equally valid to encounter the transcendent reality. Thus, he argues that religious pluralism promotes a kind of equal footing pertaining to the above-mentioned aspects between all major religious traditions of the world ((Byrne , 1995).

Likewise, Meltzer in his *Three Faiths One God* further commented on three different types of attitudes

towards religious pluralism, the combative, over-simplifying and compromising attitude which also concurs that both terms are not identical. These three attitudes towards religious pluralism have very much influenced the way scholars and theologians in the West interpret the notion of religious truth claims, particularly vis-à-vis the 'anonymous Christians'.

The first attitude he called **"the combative attitude"** referring to someone feeling that what he believed was right and what others believed was wrong. According to Hathout, such an attitude would not bear any fruitful outcome as his only intent was to prove others wrong. The second attitude he called the **"oversimplifying attitude"** of someone claiming that all religions were the same and therefore their differences immaterial. This particular attitude was potentially troublesome as every religion held its own unique beliefs with different takes on fundamental issues. The third attitude he called the **"the compromising attitude"** that advocated certain reforms of all religions in order to suit the norms and values of modern Western society. It potentially diminishes the important aspects of religion and denies some of its fundamental particularly in the context of Christian religion.

According to Meltzer these three attitudes needed to be eliminated since they would never allow for a constructive religious dialogue. In fact, it calls for only a fake solution in terms of accommodating different belief systems and plurality. He argued, "It is now the responsibility of those who believe in Him to show that they, while taking the different paths to Him can acknowledge each other and have a straightforward, honest, informing and fruitful dialogue" (Meltzer, 1989, p.2).

Diagram 1: Three Different Attitudes towards Religious Pluralism
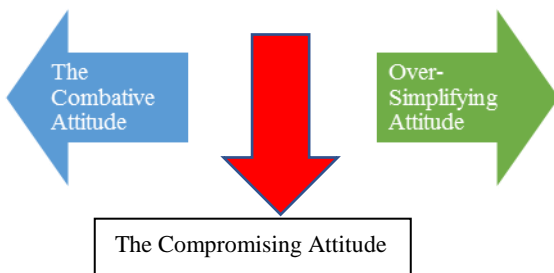
This scenario has largely characterized the way in which modern Christians perceived other world religions. These different views of looking at religion have also resulted in the birth of civil religion in the modern American society. Civil religion is "a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people." (Bellah, 1967, p.8). The many debates over the term among scholars

have led some to a conclusion that religious pluralism is a contested term and that it requires a thoughtful clarification.

Current Situation in Malaysia

Lee and Ackerman (1997) both share their belief that in Malaysia religious pluralism is frequently challenged and in danger of breaking down. They have shed some light on the practical situation of the Malaysian society for having different religious backgrounds and identities. Despite having its uniqueness, Malaysia is challenged by many circumstances and breakdowns. This has been particularly voiced out by Western scholars known for their anti-Islamic polemics such as Bernard Lewis citing the reasons why Islam today fails to cope with modernity, cultural diversity and pluralism. This form of scholarly discourse has influenced other countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia which are predominantly Muslim (Munawwar, 2007). In Malaysia, the different interpretations of religious pluralism have given rise to disputes among the various theological schools particularly among Muslims and Christians. For example, tensions rise when prominent politicians are being perceived as promoting religious pluralism aka John Hick which resulted in loud cries of criticism from the more traditional Muslim quarters. The dilemma of whether to support religious pluralism or not has unsettled many religious communities, not only those in Malaysia. It has produced varied reactions among unaffiliated individuals and religious prelates. Asma Asfaruddin has voiced her concern by saying that the issue of religious pluralism poses a real conundrum for Muslim scholars in particular. Therefore, Malaysian experience does not constitute an exception. It is this important to discuss this issue especially in a country that is predominantly Muslim represented by the Malays who live alongside the predominantly Chinese Christians and Buddhists and the Indian Hindus and Sikhs.

The majority of Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims categorically reject religious pluralism as being too closely linked to Western secularism, liberalism and modernism. Asma Asfaruddin discussed the negative impact of Western globalization on the Muslim society in general that confronted them with the idea of pluralism. She argued that the process of globalization promises, or threatens to spread pluralism throughout the world. Since globalization is led largely by the West and is associated with modernization, not everyone is necessarily ready for it or comfortable with it. "But the process we may say, is well-nigh irreversible – and it is this new, pluralist world with seemingly no frontiers that all people, including Muslims, have to come to terms with" (Asfaruddin, 2008, p.23).

The definition given by its famous proponent John Hick has been preferred in many discourses although many scholars tend to disagree. Hick defines the idea in philosophical term that it is "a theory that the great world religions constitute variant conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the one ultimate, mysterious divine reality" (Hick & Knitter, 1987). It is the view that "the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate, and that within each of them independently the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality centeredness is taking place (Hick & Knitter, 1987). Hence, the meaning constitutes various conceptions of religious groups and individuals to the meaning, concept, and idea of God, the Real i.e. the ultimate reality or divine being. Also, it has switched the position of a particular religion (i.e. Christianity) from self-centeredness (i.e. Jesus) to reality centeredness (i.e. the existence of divine reality or realities) in which it brings forward the most significant value of a religion (i.e. the concept of salvation) which cannot be solely obtained from Christianity but can also be gained from other religions as well. In short, although each and every religion may have different versions on the concept of God or the idea of truth, they could share the same position in response to the idea of the Real/ the Ultimate Reality or religious truth-claims. (See the diagram below).

Diagram 2: The Position of Major Religions of the World vis-à-vis Religious Pluralism

(Source: Anis Malik Thoha, 2010. Religious Plurality: Myth or Reality?
<mpf.org.my/wp/wpcontent/uploads/2010/01/religiouspluralitydranis.pdf.>)

Result and Discussion

Due to the theological and religious inconsistencies of the term, a considerable number of Muslims, among them muftis and distinguished scholars, along with important sects in Christianity, inevitably have voiced out their disapproval. A critical review from the main theological discourse of *Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah* to Malay Muslims is the late Ustaz Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady. This is also among his important endeavour in facing the threats of religious pluralism in the Malaysian society (Uthman El-Muhammady, 2012). He argues that, this idea is perilous since it damages the cardinal belief of a Muslim. Not only that, Muslim has to acknowledge the validity of other religions in order to justify modern values of justice and religious freedom. These are among the important aspects that deal with Muslim scholars.

Religious Pluralism: a Christian-Muslim Debate

Most of the Muslim interviewees shared their concern that the term religious pluralism is not well understood by Muslims. The meaning of diversity alone does not reflect the complete understanding of the term. Although the term can be approached from its conventional and philosophical meaning, its connection to Hick is undeniable. Therefore, some of the Muslim scholars avowed that it should be understood along the lines of its main proponent i.e. John Hick. Hick's emphasis that there exists no single unifying truth and religious claims are equally valid has clearly distinguished its meaning from the conventional view (Yusri Mohamad, 2016). "This ideology was introduced to our spectrum of religious experience by its Western advocators who promoted the notion that there were many ways to the truth" (Muhammad Kamal Hassan, 2016). This coincides with Haslina Ibrahim's view who points at the exclusive and inclusive nature of the Christian religion at one particular time.

Haslina Ibrahim (2016) attempts to highlight the setbacks of religious pluralisms from the history of Christianity. She argues that what happened in the history of Christianity tells us that the issue of exclusivism – to maintain the identity of retaining the absolute truth claim has been marred by fanaticism and murder. St Arius, for example, lost his life over his refusal to accept the Trinitarian doctrine. The Nicene Council compelled all Christians to adopt trinity as the unchallenged dogma in the Empire and meant certain death to anyone who opposed it.

Meanwhile, Hashim Kamali and Chandra Muzaffar have examined its root and relation with Islam.

Both have categorically rejected on the ground that it can be simply reduced to being a Western idea. They also asserted that liberalism and secularism have incorporated some of its values. "Similarly, those values carry their meanings within their certain context" (Muhammad Hashim Kamali, 2016). Chandra Muzaffar (2016) also contends the way how Hick understood religious pluralism and insists that we (the Muslims) have to counter it. The current discourse of religious pluralism has urged religious adherents to look forward for a more tolerable view in relation to diversity and harmonious living together (Hashim Kamali, 2016)

On the other hand, Haslina Ibrahim rejects it within the Malaysian setting as far as Hick's definition of pluralism is concerned. "Our constitution does not approve the value of religious pluralism. Constitutionally speaking, religious pluralism is impossible. A Malay by definition is characterized by his or her religious identity. Non-Muslims cannot impose their religion to the Malays (Haslina Ibrahim, 2016). She predicts that those who advocate religious pluralism in the country will ultimately clash with one of the core principles of the state constitution.

A similar trend seems to have been echoed by the Christian proponent in Malaysia. Eugene Yapp (2016), a leading figure of evangelical Christians in the country stresses the importance to equate the meaning of this social reality with its philosophical contour. "It constitutes a novel term in Christianity which has arisen from the rationalist scholarly debates in the 17th century. This idea gained prominence from the liberal debates arising in the 60s and 70s. Having nurtured in the framework of Western secular and liberal thought, political pluralism owes its meaning from political liberalism. "There will be certainly a problem if we Malaysians take only the form and forget the context."

This social phenomenon of multi-faiths is more celebrated in the West particularly after the tragedy of 9/11. According to Ng Kam Weng (2016), "religious pluralism is attractive for short term survival to intellectuals of minority groups. Religious pluralism is a form of intellectual position that implies no value-judgment on religion. Each and every religion has its own integrity and this constitutes a dilemma to all if no comparison is made in regard to the ultimate truth.

David Chong views the implications of religious pluralism from the perspective of Christian evangelization. He argues that the pluralist mission seems to have presented "a truth-seeking mode of interfaith dialogue" to substitute evangelism (David Chong, 2006, pp.6-5) "This has nonetheless, the tendency to ignore the true mission. The discourse of religious pluralism had permeated a kind of the so-called Western radical theologies in such countries like Malaysia, Korea, Japan and India. As far as the Christian

evangelization is concerned, it has by far, impacted the Christian evangelical mission and theological belief. Thus, it is as a challenge to Christians, not only to the evangelical groups, but a considerable number of neo-orthodox and liberal theologians in Asia have rebuked the principles of pluralism (Ho Jin Jun, 1998).

Or in other words, the perspective of Asian Christians has become victim due to the pressures of non-Christian religions. Moreover, from the perspective of a Christian, the Gospel plays an important role as it shapes the thinking of all Christians. Any presupposition that is against the Gospel should be void (David Chong, 2015). The Christian belief in Christ as incarnate, crucified and risen is so fundamental that it cannot be substituted by any philosophical system, mystical experience or the call for national or global unity (David Chong, 2015).

Some of the Christian representatives deny that the idea of religious pluralism poses a threat of any kind. They argue that it has been part of their commitment to foster religious tolerance and harmony. The Catholic Church in Malaysia is hopeful that religious pluralism is going to succeed in creating a more tolerant and inclusive society. Yet, this is particularly because the idea of religious pluralism has been equated with the so-called "modern values". Scholars who propagate this idea, particularly in the contemporary discourse of religious pluralism, emphasize on values such as tolerance, progress, human rights, religious freedom, or in the view of the secular humanism that implies 'equality'. Religious pluralism does not actually recognize tolerance and that it constitutes a deceptive value (Diana Eck, 2000). The trend has also looked up to these values as the normative ideals that those who disagree with the notion of religious pluralism are deemed intolerant, arrogant, and backward who are against these so-called modern values and living in diversity (Khalif Muammar, 2006).

Ahmad F. Yousif (2000) espouses that religious pluralism is one significant example that some religious minorities have with the Western liberalism of religious freedom. As he shares his view with Peter Berger both assert that religious pluralism brings about the crisis of identity.

Thus, most of the scholars believed that it is important to educate people on the problem of equalizing the meaning of religious pluralism and religious plurality. This is indeed an intellectual responsibility. It is essential that all Malaysians are aware of the threats of compromising one's own identity for the sake of something peripheral.

The study also reveals that both Muslims and Christians in Malaysia particularly disagree on the basis of theological and religious aspect. Western scholarship of religious studies has been emanated from the secular

view of Enlightenment and rationalism. Therefore, Western discourse of religious pluralism does not suit Asian multi-religious context because it has the tendency to divide than to unite. It signifies Western hegemony and arrogance.

Muhibah values: The Malaysian Identity

Most of the interviewed individuals believed that the Malaysian concept of *Muhibah* deserves to be promoted. Local scholars like Haslina Ibrahim, Yusri Mohammad and Muhammad Kamal Hassan assert that this concept can promote social harmony. Its values transcend all cultures, religions and traditions. This idea is according to Kamar Oniah "is a good sentiment to be promoted in Malaysia as it is rooted in our culture" (Kamar Oniah, 2010, p.30). Haslina (2016), further explicates that *Muhibah* is more cultivating as "it is rooted in our soil." It is a social concept developed by Tunku Abdul Rahman as a practical solution to the problem of integration existing at one point of time in the country. Haslina, like many other scholars believes that it should be encouraged in our society. The meaning of *Muhibah* was at first loosely linked with tolerance, respect and love, at its root being love (*muhibbah*) (Muhammad Kamal Hassan 2016, Yusri Muhammad, 2016). *Muhibah* signifies co-existence, togetherness, of kinship, love and affection, sympathy and empathy, respect and decorum. It is developed on the basis of agreement and sincerity of accepting each other as fellow Malaysian (Haslina Ibrahim, 2013).

Figure 4.1 Seven Elements of *Muhibah* (Source: <http://www.jpnin.gov.my/rukun_nilai_jkmpka> (retrieved June12, 2014)
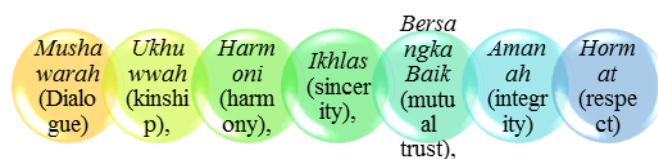
From the Christian counterpart, Tan Kong Beng (2015) is aware of the idea of *Muhibah* and wishes to see its positive and constructive values being upheld in everyday life which he characterizes as "living a life of understanding and harmony. The *Muhibah* or love in ourselves is granted by God, don't let God test us with this value." Tan and Rodriguez remind of the fact that this principle had bound the Malaysian society together in the past and should not be taken for granted. The values that make up Muhibah consist of sincerity, integrity, assisting one's neighbours, being mindful of

others and moderation. Representing the Presbyterian Christians, David Chong (2015) welcomes any future policy that would promote social harmony and unity without interfering with other religions. *Muhibah*, or any other policy that could promote social harmony of all religious communities in Malaysia is appreciated. He stresses the importance for the people of the book to promote *Muhibah*, which connotes to the meaning of racial reconciliation, social equality and mutual appreciation. If we fail to do, "we undermine resources from our own faith for these fundamental values" (David Ching, 2015). On the other hand, we should not subscribe to religious pluralism as an ideology and to justify it from our own religious sources. According to Eugene Yapp (2015), *Muhibah* constitutes a concept based on the presumption that Malaysian society is or should become a pluralistic society. He stresses the essential value of tolerance which does not translate into compromising on everything. As far as the religious pluralism discourse is concerned, a clear distinction has to be made between religious pluralism and religious plurality or diversity. On this basis common values can be found and propagated. Eugene Yapp (2015) has illustrated the following comments on *Muhibah* that;

> *Muhibah* deals with pluralistic societies like Malaysia. In that sense I think we can work together. We are diverse, and the question what is good for all, espouses to us tolerance, acceptance, mutual respect, active engagement, mutual understanding which are indispensable for a harmonious, pluralistic society.

Conclusion

It is obvious that religious pluralism possesses not only a contentious history but also denoted a struggling coexistence of many diverse and sometimes even contradicting ideas. As explained, there are many reasons have been given by many prominent Muslim and Christian scholars as to why this idea has not been accepted in Malaysia. Until today, no consensus has been reached on its definition, yet some have continued using the term within the framework of the Western tradition while others, mostly social scientists continued to argue that tolerance and religious freedom constitute the hallmarks of the country's stability. With the continuous efforts made by the social scientists to highlight the essential values of religious pluralism promoted by John Hick, it is hoped that this idea should not be used generously to denote religious diversity as it does not suit the pluralistic ambience of Malaysian society.

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Interviews

Excerpt from the interview with Muhammad Kamal Hassan, Distinguished Professor at International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), on May 17, 2016 (Monday).

Excerpt from the interview with Haslina Ibrahim, Associate Professor at Kuliyyah of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion, International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), on May 5, 2016 (Thursday).

Excerpt from the interview with Yusri Muhammad, Chairman of YADIM (Yayasan Dakwah Islamiyyah Malaysia) at YADIM's office at Kompleks Pusat Islam, Jalan Perdana, 50480, Kuala Lumpur, on June 20, 2016 (Monday).

Excerpt from the interview with Muhammad Hashim Kamali, The Founding CEO of International Institute of Advance Islamic Studies Malaysia (IAIS) on May 23, 2016 (Monday) at his office Jalan llmu, Off Jalan University, 59100, Kuala Lumpur.

Excerpt from the interview with Chandra Muzaffar, Director of International Movement for a JUST World on June 23, 2016 (Monday) at lot 1066, Jalan SS22/43, 47400 Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

Excerpt from the interview with Tan Kong Beng, the Executive Secretary of Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) on Nov 19, 2014 (Wednesday) at the CFM's main office, 10 Jalan 11/9, Section 11, 46200 Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

Excerpt from the interview with Eugene Yapp, the Secretary General of National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF) on Wednesday, (Dec 17th, 2014) at the NECF main office, 32, Jalan SS2/103, 47300 Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

Excerpt from the interview with Pastor David Chong, a representative of Presbyterian Church, on Monday (April 20, 2015), at the City Discipleship Presbyterian Church, W-10-2, Subang Square Business Centre, Jalan SS15/4G Subang Jaya, 47500, Selangor.