



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i10/15533> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i10/15533

Received: 16 August 2022, **Revised:** 17 September 2022, **Accepted:** 29 September 2022

Published Online: 11 October 2022

In-Text Citation: (Majid, 2022)

To Cite this Article: Majid, A. A. (2022). Inter-Religious Dialogue: Detrimental to Aqidah or Medium of Da'wah? *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(10), 2626 – 2641.

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Vol. 12, No. 10, 2022, Pg. 2626 – 2641

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



www.hrmars.com

ISSN: 2222-6990

Inter-Religious Dialogue: Detrimental to Aqidah or Medium of Da'wah?

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Abstract

The implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia is still less encouraging, although it has been implemented for a few decades. This reality is apparently associated with scepticism towards inter-religious dialogue itself. Inter-religious dialogue is often misunderstood as a platform to promote religious pluralism which is detrimental to aqidah. However, a case study conducted on three Islamic organizations namely Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI), Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM) and Islamic Information Services (IIS) conveyed that these organizations had implemented inter-religious dialogue as part of their da'wah efforts. This study aims at exploring the implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia, assessing the role of inter-religious dialogue in da'wah as stated in the Quran and, examining Islamic organizations involve in inter-religious dialogue and da'wah. This study offers a novelty in the realm of inter-religious dialogue where it combines socio-psychological and theological framework in gauging inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia. The findings from this study yields practical implication for the dialogue practitioners and organizations to enrich their own dialogue models based on the types and designs of dialogue identified in this research. The findings also proves that dialogue is harmless to aqidah, in fact it is a medium to spread da'wah.

Keywords: Dialogue, Design, Aqidah, Da'wah, Malaysia

Introduction

Even though the freedom to religious exercise has been guaranteed in article 11 (Federal Constitution) the prevalence of Islamic cultures and values in this country has sparked discontentment among the non-Muslim community. 1980s witnessed the proliferation of Islamic programs and institutions which exacerbated the sense of insecurity among the non-Muslim.

Among the major Islamic programs that were carried out by the government during that period were Establishment of Islamic Banks, Islamic Pawnshops, Islamic Insurance and an Islamic Economic Foundation in 1981; Establishment of an International Islamic University Malaysia in 1983; and Declaring that the status of Islamic judges and courts were expected to be on equal level with the civil judges in 1988 (Hussin, 1993). According to Abdul Rahman

(2001), the advent of Islamic resurgent movements and the growth of Islamic cultural and values in public space caused the 1980s became a dark chapter for inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

Among the concerns that are raised by the non-Muslims are; they are concerned that Malaysia would become a theocratic state, which in turn restricting religious freedom of the people; it will strengthen the Malay position; the restrictions over the construction of their places of worship and cemetery land; the prohibition on the use of certain Arabic-derived Malay words such as Allah, salah, bayt Allah and Ka'bah, the prohibition on the publication of Bible in Bahasa Melayu; education system that focuses on Islamic education rather than the education of other religions; surplus of Islamic programs in the national media; and freedom of conversion for the Muslim (Yousif, 2004). The Islamic programs are supposed to promote the premise of moderate Islam in multi-cultural Malaysian society (Yeoh, 2007). However, lack of information about the programs, their contents and implementation has led to misunderstanding and protest among non-Muslims as they fear this trend will affect their cultural and religious values.

Things become even more complicated, when Islam as a universal religion is conflated with Malay ethnicity as stated in article 160. This article is significant since it serves as a symbol of Malay identity, which comprises Islam, bahasa (Malay language) and raja (aristocratic government of the sultans) (Shamsul, 1997). The protection of these three pillars including Islam is crucial in order to protect Malay ethnicity. Any perceived threat towards Islam is considered as a threat to the Malay. As Shad Saleem (2004:81-82) has put it, "Any attempt to weaken a Malay's religious faith may be perceived as an indirect attempt to erode Malay power." The special position of Malay in the constitution and the association of Malay ethnicity with Islam in this country yields ethnocentric and exclusive Malay generation. This affect the way Muslims responding to inter-religious issues or matters in which those issues were treated with ethnocentric and rigid attitude.

The issues of "Kalimah Allah," Bible in Bahasa Melayu and the issue of murtad for instance were technically 'solved' with undiplomatic approach. For instance, the Bible Society of Malaysia premise was raided by religious authorities to seize the copies of Bible in Bahasa Melayu. There was also a Hindu wedding ceremony that had been raided in order to investigate the allegedly Muslim bride. The latest issue that reflects lack of inter-religious understanding and diplomatic approach is the issue of conversion of three minors to Islam without the consent of their non-Muslim mother (Anbalagan, 2022).

Such approaches and lack of opportunities for dialogue, often deteriorate rather than resolve inter-religious issues. This reality in turn will give a bad impression on Islam. This is where dialogue is needed in order to resolve inter-religious issues and provide a proper understanding on Islam. However, dialogue itself often regarded as a platform for promoting religious pluralism, conversion and therefore detrimental to aqidah.

The following discussion therefore will focus on these three objectives: first, to explore the implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia, second, to assess the role of inter-religious dialogue in dissemination of Islamic messages as stated in the Quran and third, to examine Islamic organizations involve in inter-religious dialogue and da'wah. In order to

achieve the objectives, a case study was conducted on three Islamic organizations namely Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI), Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM) and Islamic Information Services (IIS).

Implementation of Inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia

Inter-religious dialogue which began taking place in the 80s supposedly served as one of measures to curb the misconception related to the massive Islamic development in that era (Khairulnizam & Suzy, 2008). However, poor and unsystematic design of dialogue caused its ineffectiveness in providing explanation for the Islamisation process.

Inter-religious issues appear to be lingering, following the ongoing development of Islamic culture and a lack of ways to explain it. The non-Muslims relentlessly perceive that they will lose the freedom to exercise their religions if Islam continues to be granted the special position in the constitution and in this country. If the non-Muslim discover the truth about Islam, they would not feel intimidated with the Islamic development in this country since Islam does promote the freedom of religion and never deny the rights of others to perform their religious rites and rituals.

The significant role of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia is still underestimated even though it has been implemented for more than a decade ago by Muslim as well as non-Muslim organizations. Poor participation in inter-religious dialogue among Malaysian society, particularly the Muslim community, could be attributed to lack of understanding on the concept and meaning inter-religious dialogue, its importance in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, and its role in da'wah.

Inter-religious Dialogue and da'wah in the Quran

Some might argue that the exposure to other religions through inter-religious dialogue might jeopardise a Muslim's aqidah (faith). The Quran provides several dialogic methods in dealing with the non-Muslims. Among those verses are:

“O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah. If then they turn back, say ye: Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah’s will).” (Quran, 3: 64)

“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.” (Quran, 16: 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.” (Quran, 41: 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.” (Quran, 20 :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)’.” (Quran, 29: 46)

These verses clearly indicate that Islam promotes the use of gentle words and wisdom in the course of da’wah. If the message of Islam was rejected then just let them live their own way since Allah said in Surah al-Kafirun:

“Say: O ye who reject Faith, I worship not that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you be your Way, and to me mine.” (Quran, 109: 1-3)

In several other verses, Allah reminds the Muslims that their responsibility is only to convey the message of Islam to the non-Muslims and not to compel them to become believers.

“If it had been thy Lord’s will, they would all have believed, - all who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!” (Quran, 10: 99)

“So remind, you are only one who reminds. You are not a dictator over them.” (Quran, 88: 21-22)

“So if they dispute with thee, say: ‘I have submitted My whole self to Allah and so have those who follow me.’ And say to the People of the Book and to those who are unlearned: ‘Do ye (also) submit yourselves?’ If they do, they are in right guidance, but if they turn back, Thy duty is to convey the Message; and in Allah’s sight are (all) His servants.” (Quran, 3: 20)

These verses have shown that Islam teaches the tactful dialogic method in dealing with the non-Muslim and in the course of da’wah. Dialogue therefore is not something alien in Islam since it is inherent in the Quran.

Islamic Organizations Involve in Inter-religious Dialogue and Da’wah

In Malaysia, there are few organizations that correspond to the Quranic dialogical approach to da’wah such as Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM), Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI) and Islamic Information Services (IIS). These organizations therefore, were selected as samples in a case study. The subsequent discussion will include the background of these organizations, the main goals in implementing inter-religious dialogue and the organizational dialogue designs. The design of dialogue was categorized according to the four types of dialogue as proposed by (Zuniga and Nagda, 2001). The four types are:

collective inquiry; critical-dialogic education; conflict resolution and peace building; and community building and social action.

Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM)

Organization Background

Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia or commonly known as IKIM was officially established on February 18, 1992 as a response to various forms of threats to the Islamic creed for instance certain heretical teachings and sects that use the name of Islam (Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia [IKIM], n.d.).

Goals in Implementing Inter-religious Dialogue

The main goals of IKIM are to convey an accurate understanding of Islam through research activities, seminars, workshops, forums, consultations, training and publications. Inter-religious dialogue is also one of IKIM's methods to achieve these goals. Among the issues addressed by this institution are strategic issues, globalization, the implementation of Islamic economics and legislation system, inter-religious relations, bioethics, human rights issues and so forth (IKIM, n.d.).

Dialogue Design

Inter-religious dialogue through the lens of IKIM is a formal interaction as occurs in seminars, forums, talks or public lectures. IKIM does not consider informal interaction, that we experience in everyday life such as in the market, workplace, school and many more as dialogue even though some people identifies this as 'dialogue of life' (Informer 1). Two types of dialogue have been identified in IKIM's inter-religious dialogue model which is community building and critical-dialogic education.

Community Building

IKIM organizes programs that focus on universal values or common issues that are the concern of every religious community such as social issues, ethics, morality and akhlaq (disposition) (Informer 1). Therefore, community building type of dialogue best describes this approach.

Among the seminars that reflect the spirit of community building was a two day seminar "Peranan Agama dalam Menangani Masalah Sosial" (The Role of Religions in Dealing with Social Problems) held on December 8 to 9, 2010 (Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia [IKIM], 2010a). This dialogue program that took the format of a seminar was attended by participants from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. There were four sessions altogether (two sessions a day) with different moderators for each session. There was a single theme for each session with three to five speakers presenting papers related to the theme.

Among the invited speakers were the late Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady who presented on "Fahaman dan Penghayatan Prinsip Beriman kepada Tuhan dalam Islam" (Understanding and Actualization of the Principle of Belief in God in Islam) and Othman Mustapha who spoke on "Peranan Institusi dan Organisasi Keagamaan Menangani Masalah Sosial di Malaysia" (The Role of Religious Institutions and Organizations in Dealing with Social Problems in Malaysia). Among other speakers were Bala Tharumalingam representing Hindus, John Gurusamy representing the Christians and Sarjit S. Gill representing the Sikhs.

Critical-dialogic Education

Apart from community-building dialogues, IKIM also actively organizes several seminars and intellectual discourses on religion that are aimed at enhancing inter-religious understanding. Therefore, any inter-religious dialogue with this aim is categorized under the critical-dialogic educational dialogue type. An example of critical-dialogic education type of dialogue implemented by IKIM was “A Multi-cultural Understanding of Filial Piety” held on February 17 to 18, 2009 (Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia [IKIM], 2009).

This overall dialogue design resembles the design of the community-building dialogue model entitled “Peranan Agama dalam Menangani Masalah Sosial” but with the addition of discussion sessions among participants. There were a total of five sessions (i.e. two sessions on the first day and three sessions on the second day. Among the topics discussed was “Respect for Parents and Filial Responsibility.”

The invited speaker for that seminar was Mother Mangalam the President of The Pure Life Society. Other than a speaker, there were also four discussants invited to discuss the topic in detail; Kumaran Syberamiam from University of Malaya, Fatimah Chan Abdullah from Desa Creative Foundation, Master Chin Kung from Amitabha Societies and John Gurusamy from Inter-faith Network. A question and answer session followed the presentation and discussion. A summary of IKIM’s dialogue type and its design can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
IKIM’s Dialogue Design

Type	Community Building	Critical-dialogic Education
Design		
Theme/topic	Ethical and moral issues (e.g., “Peranan Agama dalam Menangani Masalah Sosial”)	Universal values e.g. “Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The Muhibah Perspective”
Setting	IKIM’s grand Hall	NA
Participant	Public audience	Experts and leaders
Moderator/speaker	3 to 4 different speakers, 3 to 4 different moderators for 3 to 4 different sessions (different sub-topic for each session)	1 moderator, 1 speaker and 3 three discussants
Format	Seminar	Intellectual discourse
Duration	2 days seminar (December 8-9, 2010)	Half day (9.30 a.m. to 12.40 p.m. on November 2, 2010)
Ground rules	NA	NA
Evaluation	Evaluation form	NA
Activities	None	None

Note. NA= Not available

Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI)

Organization Background

IPSI was established in 1989, dedicated to propagating the ultimate message of tawhid (Islamic Propagation Society International [IPSI], n.d.a). The main approach adopted by IPSI to achieve this goal is the comparative religion approach. This includes promoting the recitation of the Quran with translation to facilitate understanding, non-Muslim guided mosque tours, public lectures delivered by prominent Muslim scholars, and the printed booklets authored by renowned comparative religious scholars such as Ahmed Deedat, Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, Gary Miller, Zakir Naik, Imran Hussein, Yvonne Ridley, Daniel Zainal Abidin and others (IPSI, n.d.b).

Goals in Implementing Inter-religious Dialogue

The goal of IPSI in implementing inter-religious dialogue is to eliminate negative perceptions and sentiments towards Islam through dialogue. In addition, inter-religious dialogue also aims to improve inter-religious relation in Malaysia. Dialogue is the best platform to achieve this goal as it can attract non-Muslims to its program through its multi-religious approach (Informer 2).

Dialogue Design

Most IPSI programs such as public lecture, mosque tours, free Islamic classes, distribution of Islamic literature, and inter-religious dialogue fall under critical-dialogic education type.

Critical-dialogic Education

At IPSI, inter-religious dialogue is commonly conducted in collaboration with students of from University of Science Malaysia (Penang Campus). In order to promote its inter-religious dialogue program, IPSI will also organize an exhibition. Among the dialogue formats generally applied by IPSI are seminars or forums discussing selected topics with guest speakers representing major religions in Malaysia such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism.

In the forum, each speaker will be given twenty minutes for a presentation. Afterwards, a question and answer session takes place followed by a concluding speech by the speakers. The question and answer sessions during dialogue programs organized by IPSI are different from other programs because the IPSI question and answer sessions are longer and more extensive. This session provides more opportunities for the audience to dispel any doubt whenever proper explanations were given. During the question and answer session, the participants are allowed to ask any question as long as they observe the guidelines provided at the beginning of the dialogue program. Among the rules are; participants must maintain a professional manner, adopting 'agree to disagree' stance, and never ask sensitive or disrespectful questions, or inquiries about theology (Informer 2). Table 2 shows a summary of the IPSI dialogue design.

Table 2
IPSI's Dialogue Design

Type	Critical-dialogic Education
Design	
Theme/topic	General topic. For instance peace, happiness etc. Not focusing on theology
Setting	Big hall (e.g., USM hall)
Participant	Students and public Majority non-Muslim
Moderator/speaker	3 to 4 speakers with 1 moderator
Format	Seminar
Duration	Few hours at night (normally 8p.m.-11p.m.)
Ground rules	Participants were reminded by the moderator from the beginning to observe the dialogue ethics
Evaluation	Non-systematic observation
Activities	Exhibition

Islamic Information Services (IIS)

Organization Background

Islamic Information and Services Foundation (IIS) is another a non-profit da'wah organisation dedicated to conveying messages about Islam; addressing misinformation and misconceptions about Islam; conducting islah (reform); providing a platform for da'wah activities for Muslims; offering courses on Islam; providing services for reverts and potential reverts; conducting da'i training; providing services that are beneficial for community development; organizing programs that appeal to Muslim youth and promoting Islam as a multi-racial and cross-cultural way of life (Islamic Information and Services Foundation [IIS], 2006).

IIS also initiated the "Hotel Quran Project," which was a significant da'wah endeavour. This programme was successful in distributing the Quran with English translations in prestigious 4 star and 5 star hotels around Peninsular Malaysia (Informer 3).

Goals in Implementing Inter-religious Dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue, according to IIS, is an approach to conveying the message of Islam to people of other religions. Inter-religious dialogue also provides an opportunity for Muslims to increase their knowledge about other religions as well as about Islam. Therefore, inter-religious dialogue is also part of the endeavours to strengthen the faith of Muslims.

Some might argue that exposure to other religions can pose a threat to Muslim's faith, but IIS adheres to the promise of Allah as stated in the Quran (al-Baqarah: 256) that the falsehood will never override the truth (Informer 3).

Dialogue Design

Due to its various da'wah activities, IIS has adopted a various designs of inter-religious dialogue including the common designs found in other organizations as well as some unique designs. These various designs have been identified and classified into different types.

Critical-dialogic Education

IIS inter-religious dialogue differs from those of other organisations in that it only includes a few religions in the dialogue program. For instance dialogue between Islamic and Buddhist groups only, or dialogue between Islamic and Hindu groups only rather than having three or four different religious groups in a dialogue. An example of this type of dialogue design was a program entitled "Sowing Seeds of Understanding and Harmony" an inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Buddhists community. It was conducted on May 8, 2010 at Hang Tuah Room, Mines Wellness Hotel in Seri Kembangan.

This dialogue program was divided into two major sessions (i.e. morning and afternoon session). The participants consisted of a delegates from the Buddhist Institute Sunday Dhamma School (BISDS) representing Buddhist Maha Vihara (BMV) and a delegation from IIS. The Buddhist speaker was represented by Suthoda Thero from Buddhist Maha Vihara while Muslim speaker was represented by Shah Kirit Kalkulal Govindji from IIS.

The presentation was followed by a round of questions and answers. The second session started at noon after a lunch break. This session focused on future collaboration between Buddhists and Muslims as in the previous successful dialogue experience with Hindu Sanggam. The dialogue eventually resolved on four future plans: the initiation of religious talks, visits, youth programs and special question and answer programs (Islamic Information and Services Foundation [IIS], 2010).

Conflict Resolution and Peace Building

IIS is also actively involved in organizing closed dialogues with different religious groups such as the closed dialogue with Hindu Sanggam in August 2008. This dialogue was not open to the public since it involved the discussion of sensitive issues regarding Hindu-Muslim relations in this country. Therefore, this type of dialogue can best be described as conflict resolution.

This dialogue was co-organized with the Allied Coordinative Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN). This two day ground breaking dialogue was participated by Hindu and Muslim representatives and leaders. During this dialogue sensitive issues affecting both religions were discussed openly, yet professionally. Among the concerns raised were the issue of cemeteries, the conversion to other religions (whether to Hinduism or Islam), and the demolition of Hindu temples.

This dialogue attempts to clarify any misunderstandings that may give rise to polarization. At the end of this dialogue, the Muslims and Hindus reached an agreement on certain issues and were ready for future cooperation. This dialogue also included some leisure activities such as sailing and a chess competition (Informer 3). Table 3 summarized two types of dialogue normally organized by IIS and its design.

Table 3

IIS's Dialogue Design

Type	Critical-dialogic education	Conflict Resolution
Design		
Theme/topic	Theological (e.g., "Sowing Seeds of Understanding and Harmony")	Sensitive issues (Dialogue with Hindu Sanggam)
Setting	Conference room (Hang Tuah Room, Mines Wellness Hotel, Seri Kembangan)	NA
Participant	Leaders (Muslim and Buddhist representatives)	Leaders (Muslim and Hindu representatives)
Moderator /speaker	1 speaker representing each religion	Leaders (Muslim and Hindu representatives)
Format	Seminar	Closed dialogue
Duration	1 day	2 days
Ground rules	Briefed by the moderator	NA
Evaluation	NA	NA
Activities	None	Leisure activities (sailing, chess)

Note. NA= Not available

Discussion

There are a few key points that can be highlighted based on the data obtained from the case study of the three organizations. First, as a Muslim living in a diverse society like Malaysia, we must change the way we deal with inter-religious issues and the way we engage with non-Muslim. How fortunate we are to be born as a Malay Muslim and live in a country that bestows Islam with a special rank and position. Nevertheless, this does not excuse us for our exclusive and ethnocentric attitude toward non-Muslims. This is completely contrary to Islamic principles which regard Islam as a mercy to the whole world not to particular ethnicity or races.

"And We have sent you (O Muhammad) not but as a mercy for the `Alamin."

As previously stated, Islam has embraced the dialogic approach in dealing with non-Muslims. Even if they reject the invitation to Islam, we should not ever speak to them in a hostile or offensive manner. Even in the face of Pharaoh, Allah had reminded the Prophet Moses A.S to use gentle word (Quran, 21 :107)

"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." (Quran, 20:43-44)

The same dialogical approach has also been adopted by the three Islamic organizations being studied, namely IKIM, IPSI and IIS. In dealing with sensitive inter-religious issues, for instance, IIS organized a closed dialogue with Hindu Sanggam in 2008. This was perhaps the best approach in resolving inter-religious issues and conflicts compared to open debate or public protest. Other than addressing issues and conflict, the inter-religious dialogue could also be

used as a means to increase inter-religious understanding and hence improve inter-religious relations like the dialogue program organized by IKIM entitled “Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The Muhibah Perspective.”

Second, inter-religious dialogue has never been a threat to one’s faith otherwise the three Islamic organizations (i.e. IKIM, IPSI and IIS) will never use inter-religious dialogue as part of their da’wah methods. It is evident from the main goals of the three organizations. IIS for instance deliberately using inter-religious dialogue as a platform to convey the message of Islam to people of other religions.

Inter-religious dialogue, therefore, could be the ideal platform for da’wah because it brings together people of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. Concerns over whether Muslims would be influenced by other religions did not arise. As mentioned in the Quran (al-Baqarah: 256):

“There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the right path has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in *Taghut* and believes in Allah, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allah is All-Hearer, All-Knower.” (Quran, 2: 256)

In addition, as proof that Islam advocates freedom of religion, this verse also emphasizes that, those who have faith in Allah will not be easily go misled because the truth will always prevail.

Third, in order to improve the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue, dialogue practitioners and organizations should consider to assess their own inter-religious dialogue design. As a guideline for dialogue practitioners, Zuniga and Nagda (2001) have provided the four-stage dialogue model as well as some practise principles (see appendix 1). The dialogue models as applied by IKIM, IPSI and IIS could also be emulated by other organizations that involve in inter-religious dialogue. These three organizations had many experiences in organizing different types of inter-religious dialogue model such as community building, critical-dialogic education and conflict resolution.

In addition, Arfah et. al (2020) has also suggested few subjects or themes that are suitable for inter-religious dialogue. Among the themes are the participant own faith and god; others’ faiths and gods; religious festivals; religious rights and equality; participant’s culture and traditions, others cultures and traditions, leisure (i.e. sports, foods, entertainments); social issues; political issues; economic issues; their personal experiences living in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society and family or work life. There are also themes that should be avoided such as sensitive inter-religious issues or conflicts and any themes related to discrimination, privilege and particular policies. The findings from present study therefore also serves as a guide and reference for dialogue practitioners and organizations to improve their own dialogue design.

Conclusion

This research offers a novel approach in the study of inter-religious dialogue where it combines socio-psychological and theological framework in assessing inter-religious

dialogue in Malaysia. The main findings from this study reveal that there many other possible means for us in dealing with inter-religious issues and clarifying any misunderstanding. One of the means is inter-religious dialogue. Thus, we should resort to a more tactful ways such as dialogue rather than an aggressive approach in facing inter-religious issues or conflict. This study also confirmed that inter-religious dialogue is good platform for da'wah and it has never been a threat to one's aqidah as all Islamic organizations in this study using inter-religious dialogue as part of their da'wah efforts.

This study also yields a practical implication as it provides better insight for dialogue practitioners and organizations about their own inter-religious models since there are various types and designs of inter-religious dialogue practiced by IKIM, IPSI and IIS. Among the types of inter-religious dialogue model identified in this study are community building, critical-dialogic education and conflict resolution. Based on these types and designs provided by this research, dialogue practitioners and organizations can improve and enrich their existing dialogue models.

It is suggested that before we engage in inter-religious dialogue more actively, there is a need to increase understanding of Malaysian society about inter-religious dialogue since Malaysian in general and the Muslim's community in particular are still unaware and pessimistic about inter-religious dialogue. The protest to the establishment of Jawatankuasa Mempromosikan Persefahaman dan Keharmonian Antara Penganut Agama (JKMPKA) for instance reflects the naivety and scepticism of the society towards inter-religious dialogue.

This research have shown that most of inter-religious dialogue participants consisted of religious leaders, scholars, NGO members and university students. Therefore, intervention from the government is required to support the dialogue effort and guarantee that inter-religious dialogue can be promoted beyond NGOs and higher education institutions to attract a wide range of communities. A successful inter-religious dialogue will not only strengthen one's aqidah but will also be a medium of da'wah and a platform to improve inter-religious relations.

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Appendix 1

Types of Dialogue and Applications for Each Stage

Types	Collective inquiry	Critical-dialogic education	Community building and social action	Conflict resolution and peace building
Setting the environment	Build a container for dialogue for safety and trust issues to emerge. Develop group consensus.	Develop guidelines for dialogue. Build relationship.	Discuss, clarify and set ground rules. Share personal beliefs and experiences about race and race relations.	Orient group members. Decide to engage in dialogue.
Developing a common base	-Explore beliefs and assumptions leading to public suspension of judgments. Dialogue about personal, work related or general topics.	Develop a common language. Explore multiple social identities, commonalities and differences.	Ask what the state of race relation in our community is. Ask what the nature of the problem with race is.	Map and name problems and relationships. Explore and clarify issues and group development.
Exploring questions issues, conflict	Increase suspension of judgment and trust. Inquiry and creativity flow. Explore personal, work related or general topics.	Explore issues of conflict and social justice. Explore in/out group dynamics and issues.	Ask participants about the main changes they would like to see in the community. Ask what kind of public policies can help.	Continue clarification of issues. Probe relationships to choose direction for change. Build scenarios-experience a change in the relationship.
Moving from dialogue to action	Assess experiences. Explore transfer of learning and skills into daily life.	Plan action. Envision and seek opportunities for action. Build alliances.	Ask what participants will do as individuals and with others to make a difference.	Plan action. Act together to make change happen. Monitor and evaluate.