THE EVOLVING FACE OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN POST-COLONIAL MALAYSIA: UNDERSTANDING ITS SHAPING FACTORS

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Abstract: This article offers a survey of the state of religious tolerance in Malaysia since her independence from Britain in 1957. Its core concern, however, is with the prevailing current public perceptions on the state of religious tolerance in the country, the outstanding challenges to its progress, and the adequacy of measures being taken by the relevant authorities, agencies, and organisations in dealing with the challenges in question. In order to put the discussion on these current public perceptions in its proper perspectives, in the view of the author it would be desirable for the discussion to be preceded by an adequate presentation on the historical development of interreligious relations in Malaysia since independence. Highlighted in this historical account are the salient features of interreligious relations over the decades that helped to determine the nature and extent of religious tolerance, as well as the impact of the Islamic revival in the 1970s and the Western-originated human rights discourse on interreligious relations in Malaysia. The author also discusses the current public perceptions and their understanding of its underlying issues. On the basis of these perceptions he makes several inferences regarding the state of religious tolerance in contemporary Malaysia.

Introduction

In a Viewpoint published in an earlier issue of this journal,1 this writer emphasised the real need for Malaysia to have an enlightened national policy on interreligious relations that would help guarantee social peace among the country’s diverse religious communities. Or, the least we expect to have from such a policy would

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be a help to generate favourable societal forces and a favourable cultural climate that can serve as a preventive social medicine to religious conflicts and strife so rampant in our contemporary world.

If the state as represented by the leadership of the ruling political parties aided by the religious establishment were to formulate and implement such a policy, then there is no doubt that it would be moving in the direction of expanding its role in the management of the country’s religious affairs. In the common jargon of our times, the state would then be seen as bringing ‘more religion in the public space’. Hardcore secularists would be screaming at the move! They would see it as a clear violation of the fundamental tenets of secularism. But neither will the believers in exclusivist religion be happy with the move. The idea of a shared spiritual space between the different religions,2 as insisted by an enlightened policy on interreligious relations, would be an anathema to their belief in religious exclusivism.

But for Malaysia – if one really understands its special characteristics as a multi-religious nation, an issue to be clarified in a later section of this article – the move in question would be the most appropriate thing to do. Both Malaysian society and the Malaysian state are religiously conditioned in a very pervasive way. Due to various factors, the Malaysian state at the time of its birth was religiously structured in a certain way, albeit preponderantly displaying the Islamic symbols. The birthmarks are still visible for us all to see. And Malaysian society is deeply religious in a way and to an extent not found especially in Western countries which call themselves ‘secular’. Given these conditions peculiar to Malaysia, neither ideological secularism nor the increasing presence of exclusivist interpretations of religion3 in the public space could be presented as an efficacious answer to the country’s need for interreligious tolerance and peace. The consequences of either choice for Malaysia could be far worse than its present situation.

To remove religion from the public space and to turn it into a ‘private matter’ would mean the uprooting of the structural foundations of both the Malaysian state and Malaysian society, the greater part of which are inspired by religion, if not directly traceable to the religious sources. No better, to bring more and more of exclusivist interpretations of religion into the public space where as a result of which the rivalry and competition between the different religions are likely to be more fierce and unruly, would mean to play havoc with interreligious relations. Thus either choice would have major repercussions on the country’s interreligious relations. A public space dominated by unruly contests for dominance between exclusivist religions is a sure breeding ground of religious intolerance, conflicts and strife.

There should not be any misunderstanding about our soliciting support for the state’s involvement in the formulation and implementation of a national policy on interreligious relations. It is not meant to be a support for the empowerment of the state to dictate the role of religion in the public space, least of all to use religion
as an instrument of the state to serve sectarian purposes. But in the pursuit of religious tolerance and interreligious peace we recognise the state as one of the major key players without whose role and help the objectives in question could not be realised. Civil society, especially the religious non-governmental organisations, has also an important role to play. Desirably, an enlightened national policy on interreligious relations has to be the end-product of a process of dialogues and consultations among the experts in the field and the representatives of both the government and the civil society groups. In speaking of the need for a national policy on interreligious relations we are actually affirming our strong belief that as far as Malaysia is concerned there is a better alternative to ideological secularism or religious exclusivism as a response to the issue of religion in the public space.

This article seeks to initiate a discourse on what we mean by an enlightened national policy on interreligious relations and on how best it could be implemented. It is hoped that this article could be appreciated as an initial contribution to the intended series of dialogues and consultations dealing as it were with the subject of religious tolerance which is central to the issue of interreligious relations. If we want to know about the state of interreligious relations in any multi-religious society or country, then we will point to the existing level of religious tolerance as perhaps its best indicator or criterion of measurement. And religious tolerance in turn has its indicators. One major indicator is the size of the common public space for the different religions existing in that society. For this reason, a policy on interreligious relations needs to deal with the issue of a common public space for all the religions. We will come to discover that the higher the existing level of religious tolerance, the wider will be the common public space shared by the participating religions. Since the national policy in question is intended to help the actualisation of the broadest common public space possible we will then realise that the more enlightened the policy, the wider the common public space it will help to create for the different religions that have been destined to live together.

The Meanings of Religious Tolerance

Since this article is about religious tolerance in post-colonial Malaysia it is necessary first to explain the meaning of religious tolerance, albeit briefly, and then to point out which of its various aspects and dimensions have been singled out as the most appropriate for treatment in relation to the Malaysian context. Considering the fact that a theory of religious tolerance that adequately comprehends the twenty-first century phenomena of religious diversity and pluralism is yet to be seen, we can only offer here the basic meanings of religious tolerance that can be used as basic guidelines in the writing of this article.
Many definitions have been given to the term ‘religious tolerance’. However, there are basic ideas that are common to all these definitions, thus suggesting that these common ideas are central to the meaning of religious tolerance. What appears to be generally accepted as a core idea in the meaning of religious tolerance is “the capacity for recognizing and respecting the beliefs or practices of others which disagree with one’s own”. The capacity for recognition and respect of differences is to be understood as admitting of various levels and degrees, from the lowest which is the minimum level of tolerance to be expected in a civilised society to the highest which is the most enlightened form of tolerance.

In the Malaysian context, religious tolerance is to be mainly understood as a collective attribute, that is, an attribute to be displayed by a particular religious community towards the other communities. It is about the state of relationship between the various religious communities, particularly between the Muslim community and the non-Muslim communities. Accordingly, the discussion in the rest of the article centres on the kind as well as the level of tolerance shown by the majority Muslim community and the non-Muslim communities towards each other. The level of religious tolerance so far attained in Malaysia may be described as one of peaceful coexistence with each community not having a deeper understanding of the ‘other’. Certainly, peaceful coexistence is only possible if there is already in place a certain level of recognition and respect of religious differences.

It is important to point out that the Malaysian constitution has already provided the boundaries of religious tolerance. The constitutional provision placing Islam as the religion of the Federation and giving freedom to the other religions to be practised is the most important shaper of these boundaries. Another provision concerns the identification of Malay ethnicity with Islam, which may be viewed as another shaper of the boundaries of Malaysian religious tolerance. A question that can be raised and which is needed to be answered is whether or not, in spite of these constitutionally imposed boundaries, it is still possible to create a vast public space for the practical expressions and the realisation of higher forms of religious tolerance in the country.

**Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: 1957–69**

It was within the constitutional framework just mentioned as well as in the light of ethnic and religious pluralism characteristic of Malaysia that interreligious relations have developed over the decades since independence. The state became the main shaper of interreligious relations and the main promoter of religious tolerance as this term was understood by them. This section is devoted to a discussion of the salient features of interreligious relations in Malaysia in the period from independence until May 1969 when the country’s worst ethnic riots erupted that were, however, mainly confined to the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. If it is desirable and at all possible...
to speak of a periodisation of the history of Malaysia’s interreligious relations according to some chosen criteria, then 1969 may be viewed as the most apt year to close the first chapter of that history. This first chapter coincides fully with the Administration of the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, who was forced to leave office following the riots. He has his own views on the place and role of Islam in the public space⁸ and many Malaysians praised him as a promoter of religious tolerance.

The second chapter or the second major phase of interreligious relations may be identified with the Administration of the Tun Abdul Razak who succeeded the Tunku. Under Razak’s rule, Malaysia entered a new era in which major policy changes were introduced in various domains of national life, including the religious. The state played a bigger role in promoting Islam in the public space but religious non-governmental organisations including the non-Muslim ones also became a more influential force in shaping the role of religion in society. The salient features of the second chapter will be discussed in the next section.

When Malaya became independent in 1957 it was characteristically pluralistic and diverse in its cultural makeup. Multi-ethnic and multi-religious, the new state displayed its distributive pattern of cultural diversity in its demographic map in a way that was matched by few countries. Its pattern of cultural diversity was particularly distinguished by the fact that there was a close identification of religion with race. Malaya was only barely a Muslim-majority country. It had a large non-Muslim population comprised mostly of Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. There were other religious minorities such as Confucians, Taoists, and Sikhs, but these were much smaller in size.

Most of the Muslims belonged to the largest ethnic group, namely the Malays, while most of the Buddhists were ethnic Chinese, and most of the Hindus were ethnic Indians. This close identification of religion with ‘race’ had the important effect of making the two issues of inter-ethnic and interreligious peace closely intertwined. The issue of religious tolerance was therefore closely related to that of inter-ethnic peaceful coexistence. The two were intricately dependent on each other. The nation’s founding fathers and many community leaders then were quite aware of what its special kind of cultural diversity would mean to its future. They realised that its cultural diversity could either be a source of strength or a source of peril to its wellbeing. In the spirit of this realisation, one early popular slogan adopted by the multi-ethnic national leadership to win the hearts and minds of the general public to its national unity goals had the message Berdiri kita teguh, bercerai kita roboh. This Malay (national language) slogan may be translated as “united we stand, apart we fall”. Objectively viewed, it is fair to say that these early leaders were generally well-intentioned and committed in their efforts to address both the good promises and the potential threats of cultural diversity.
There was no shortage of popular slogans and concrete agendas and programmes on a national scale on themes of national unity, common citizenry, common Malayan values, and a shared Malayan heritage to impress upon us today that these early leaders were deeply concerned with issues of inter-ethnic and interreligious peace and harmony. These leaders were generally seen as serious in promoting the virtues of inter-ethnic and interreligious tolerance and peace and the virtues of national unity. For this purpose, they were thoughtful enough to put to the best use all the instruments of the state and to mobilise all the resources at their disposal. But in response to the other face of cultural diversity – its potential threat to inter-ethnic and interreligious peace – they were no less hesitant and no less serious in exploiting the instruments of the state to control the mass media, shape public opinion in favour of government policies, and regulate ethnic-religious relations, all in the name of ‘nipping in the bud’ potential sources of ethnic and religious tensions and conflicts. They were always alert to the early symptoms of racial chauvinism and religious extremism in the public body.

Of all the instruments of the state used to control the public space none was as controversial as the infamous Internal Security Act (ISA) which allows indefinite detention without public trial on the ground of perceived threat to national security. The controversy surrounding the ISA persists to this day. In fact, with growing opposition in recent years seeking to abolish it, the controversy has now become more ferocious. But in the past, as there were real external and domestic threats to national security and inter-ethnic peace while nation-building was still on shaky ground, the majority of citizens seemed to be prepared to go along with the so-called wisdom of the founding fathers and the rest of the nation’s elders that it was worth sacrificing a little of their sectarian political and religious freedom for the sake of a greater common interest, namely inter-ethnic and interreligious peace. Many citizens apparently tolerated the ISA on the basis of this argument.

Viewing the national scene of ethnic and religious relations in the early years of independence, it may be said that the government was then pursuing a philosophy of religious tolerance that was primarily aimed at promoting national unity and sparing the nation of religious extremism, tensions, and conflicts. The face of religious freedom and religious tolerance in the then Malaya, to the extent that it was visible, had two important features. The first feature was mutual avoidance of encroachment or interference in religious matters by the different religious communities. This was explained as a national consensus to avoid touching religious sensitivities of all groups since these were considered as not healthy for the country.

In practical terms, however, this particular government stance had the lasting impact of discouraging or even intimidating interreligious dialogue. Despite more than 50 years of national independence interreligious dialogue has not taken root in the country’s multi-religious society to enable it to become an important aspect
of Malaysian culture. On the contrary, opposition to interreligious dialogue from the conservative religious establishment has appeared to become stronger in recent years. In the absence of such a kind of dialogue, what prevailed in the public mind was the state-nourished view that religions are far more separated from each other than they are united. In other words, it is the view that there are more differences between religions than there are similarities or commonalities.

In the light of this prevailing view, the government’s appeal to the general public was to help promote religious tolerance through an inculcation of respect for existing differences between religions. But for some reasons the content of this respect was never explained and thus left vague in the public mind. Without a concrete positive content and a strong ideational foundation the respect in question could only be a fragile one. It is the acceptance of commonalities between religions that can help nurture true mutual respect. But these commonalities can only be unveiled to the public mind through an accumulative process of mutual understanding such as can be attained through healthy interreligious dialogues. Since such dialogues were absent, religious tolerance could hardly be promoted on the basis of commonalities or shared perspectives which in the context of the social reality of the times remained largely hidden from the public eye.

One consequence of the first feature of the Malayan face of religious tolerance was thus the avoidance of a national discourse on commonalities in religious ideas and shared religious values. This brings us to the second feature of Malayan religious tolerance, namely its subordination to ethnic relations considerations. National leaders argued that inter-ethnic issues ought to be given priority over interreligious issues. The prevailing belief in government circles was that once healthy inter-ethnic relations were realised through peaceful resolutions of the conflicting ethnic demands then automatically religious tolerance would follow suit. Religious tolerance was thus seen as a logical and necessary by-product of a healthy inter-ethnic relation in the sense they had defined it. But developments in inter-ethnic relations both before and subsequent to the ‘13 May 1969’ ethnic violence did not support the belief in question and its premises despite the fact that the national focus and emphasis was on social justice for all ethnic groups.

The two features of the Malayan (and later Malaysian) face of religious tolerance just discussed go to show that interreligious relations and their underlying issues never came to occupy a central place in national discourses on inter-communal peace and national unity. While the country may be said to have an “enlightened” and a pragmatic policy on inter-ethnic cooperation and peace, it did not have one on interreligious understanding and peace. Even now, it does not have one. When Malaya merged in 1963 with Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore to form the new Federation of Malaysia the need for such a policy became even more acute. With the addition of a new demographic component that was distinctive in its ethnic
and religious distributive pattern, the new state became an even more complex cultural entity to manage. Yet an enlightened and pragmatic policy on interreligious understanding and cooperation never materialised.

True enough, Malaysia has been spared religious strife and conflict in the last 50 years. It is also true that Malaysians of different religious groups have interacted with each other peacefully in their daily lives – educational, business, political, and the workplace – but all these achievements have nothing to do with some well-defined policy on interreligious understanding and cooperation that the government of the day had put in place and enforced. It is to the credit of the Malaysian people that in spite of the absence of such a policy relative interreligious peace had prevailed in the country. But as the following section shows there are disturbing trends and developments in the country’s interreligious relations that must no longer be ignored if the relatively good record on absence of religious strife and conflicts is to be maintained.

Post-1969 Developments Affecting Interreligious Relations in Malaysia

Religious consciousness in Malaysia has been on the rise since the 1970s when the so-called ‘Islamic revival’ waves swept the country and the rest of the Islamic world. The Islamic revival among the Malays helped to generate a parallel religious consciousness among the non-Muslim communities. This is only to be expected. It is usually the case that, within the same society at least, a rising religiosity in one religious community has the contagious effect of inducing and heating up religiosity in the other communities. When Malays/Muslims, young and old, began to flock to the mosques in huge numbers for their prayers and other religious services following the first impact of Islamic revival in the country, similar trends could be observed among other religious communities. Christians began to fill the churches and Buddhists and Hindus their respective pagodas and temples.

More expressions of religiosity became visible as the followers of each religion sought to observe its tenets with greater intensity and fervour. As a result, generally speaking, each religious community became more religious. In other words, the country as a whole became more religious with all that this would imply for its ‘brand’ of religious tolerance. Thus, not long after the 13 May 1969 tragedy, Malaysia began to experience a new epoch of multi-religious consciousnesses with Islamic consciousness taking centre stage.

The kinds of plural religious consciousnesses that have gradually developed in the country in the last four decades have been an entirely new cultural phenomenon as never seen before in the history of the country. In the sense of a cultural process that was primarily generated, fuelled, and sustained by the inner forces within the new religious consciousness that were peculiar to each religious community
independently of the government’s role and policies, we may say that religionisation has taken place in each community at an increasing pace: ‘Islamisation’ in the Muslim community, ‘Christianisation’ in the Christian community, ‘Buddhistisation’ in the Buddhist community, and ‘Hindunisation’ in the Hindu community. For the highly missionary religions like Islam and Christianity this religionisation tendency often flowed across the boundaries of their respective communities, thus generating tensions between them.

With a typical pre-1970s mindset that is unaccustomed to the new religious mentality, coupled with political expediency, contemporary national leaders – political as well as religious – fail to provide an enlightened leadership that would help to bring the different religious communities together in a spirit of dialogue with the view of promoting genuine mutual understanding and an exemplary religious tolerance. In the absence of an enlightened leadership, the different religious communities were left to themselves to develop their respective religious lives and thoughts and religious discourses in an isolated and sectarian fashion without ever being guided to the path of dialogue where they can meet and talk to each other about what religions can do to advance the pursuit of the common good. There was a kind of unintentional tolerance of diverse religious pursuits in the country. This was certainly tolerance of the wrong kind. In such a climate it was sectarian religiosities that tended to dominate the thinking of each religious community at the expense of the universal elements of religious consciousness which alone have the appeal power and the efficacy to bring the different religious communities together to work for the common good.

In the longer run, this sort of religious development would not be good for Malaysia or for that matter for any other multi-religious country. If left unchecked or deprived of moderating influences such as the ones that can come from the universal elements of religious consciousness, then these coexisting sectarian religiosities would only grow and expand to the point of generating destructive societal tensions that could easily culminate in a cultural disaster in the form of religious conflicts and violence. Many political leaders did not help matters when out of political expediency such as the eagerness to secure political support from their own religious community they patronised sectarian religiosity and sectarian religionisation thus aiding its unhealthy and dangerous development.

To be sure, Malaysia is still far away from what we may call a critical stage of interreligious relations. But symptoms of religious tensions and of a religious conflict in the making are noticeable here and there in Malaysian society today. If present trends are not reversed through the implementation of an enlightened and pragmatic policy on interreligious understanding and peace then this country would likely be heading for a cultural disaster of the kind to which I have just referred. It
remains to be seen whether or not both religious and political leaders will rise to the occasion by helping to put in place such a religion policy.

Another important contemporary development that has to a certain extent soured Malaysian interreligious relations is the Western-originated human rights movement which has become global. This movement has generated a global discourse on a wide range of human rights issues on the basis of post-modernist thought. No country in the world has escaped its influence and impact. Compared to many developing countries, however, the impact on Malaysia has been much more considerable given the fact that it is more developed socially and technologically speaking, and thus more open to outside influences. Moreover, the culturally pluralistic and diverse nature of Malaysian society as well as its relatively wide democratic space makes it a fertile ground for the human rights discourses.

Prior to the arrival on the Malaysian social scene of post-modernist human rights discourse, an indigenous discourse has been going on for some time on the issue of rights and privileges. But this indigenous discourse which to this day may still be viewed as the mainstream national discourse on the subject, though significantly undermined by the new discourse, is more about ethnic than religious rights. Further, it is more about group and community than individual rights. Religion is generally excluded from the discourse. The main point of contention is the special rights and privileges enjoyed by the ethnic Malays and other bumiputeras (literally, ‘sons of the soil’). Non-Malay Muslims are not entitled to these rights and privileges, while non-Muslim bumiputeras, including many Christians, are. This clearly shows that the earlier indigenous discourse on the issue of ‘rights’ was basically formulated in ethnic rather than in religious terms.

The arrival of the Western-dominated human rights discourse has had an important effect on inter-ethnic and interreligious relations in the country. The perspectives of this discourse, which affirm ethnic, religious, and gender equality and the idea of the supremacy of individual rights over collective rights in all domains of life, have proved to be a serious challenge to the ‘traditional’ indigenous discourse on ethnic and religious issues. The ethnic Malays have reacted to this challenge in numerous ways and at various levels of their community. A significant minority within the community has abandoned the old discourse in favour of the new one. It is a heterogeneous group with many subgroups with diverse political, religious and social inclinations. But they are united on a number of issues. On the issue of ethnic rights this group seeks to justify its preference for the new discourse by appealing to such democratic values as equality before the law, social justice, and meritocracy. Another justification advanced by the group is what it claims as the abuse of the rights and privileges in question by certain segments of the Malay or bumiputera political establishment at the expense of the Malay community at large. As Muslims, members of this group also argue that their position on Malay rights
and privileges finds accord with Islam since, in their view, the religion teaches equality, meritocracy, and social justice.

On religious issues the group favours a more liberal interpretation of Islam. It is pro-interreligious dialogue as this term is widely understood today. It argues for greater religious freedom both in the specific context of Islam and in the larger national context of interreligious relations as a whole. In fact, some aspects of the freedom as demanded by this group have already been ‘unilaterally’ put into practice by its members much to the dismay of the religious establishment. These include the right and the freedom of each Muslim, male and female, to interpret the Qur’ān and the right of non-Muslims to speak about Islam. The group also argues for a religious pluralism again of the kind that is very much in vogue today. Members of this group, especially among the female ones, are generally critical of the religious establishment in their ‘conservative’ interpretations, rulings, and administrative policies on sharīʿah laws.

Though a minority and a loose group, this segment of the Malay community is large and significant enough to influence national politics, government policies, and to even upset the traditional ethnic balance of political power which used to favour the Malays. Their wide influence which is actually disproportionate to their numerical strength owes much to their ability to articulate issues and to their dynamism. It is further reinforced by the active works of their national partners in the new discourse from the other ethnic and religious groups.

The great majority in the Malay community are deeply concerned with these contemporary developments, the impact of which they have begun to feel with much unease and which they have viewed with considerable alarm. They perceive the new discourse and the various challenges it poses as a big threat to traditional Malay political and religious dominance, which they seek to defend. The religious establishments in particular are passionately defending the view that discourses on Islam must be exclusive to Muslims. Non-Muslims have no right to participate in discourses on Islam. The religious establishments are therefore strongly opposed to the democratisation and universalisation of discourses on Islam that would allow for non-Muslim participation. It is for this reason that they are also opposed to interreligious dialogue which they see as another ploy by the non-Muslims to gain access to discourses on Islam. They also see interreligious dialogue as largely a Christian initiative with the view of spreading Christianity among Muslims.

The religious establishments and many Muslim non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are opposed to the idea of religious pluralism in all of its forms. They see in this idea an ingenious attempt to place Islam on the same level with all other religions whether in respect to their theological or their societal worth. They reject the attempt as simply unacceptable. Theologically, they are defending the view that Islam is the best of all religions. From the societal point of view, they are defending
the constitutional position of Islam as the sole official religion, which therefore cannot be equated with the other religions in terms of their place and role in society. They thus see in the movement for religious pluralism a threat to the position of Islam as the official religion of the country as well as to its claim as the best religion.

If Malaysia is now passing through a new phase of uncertain interreligious relations that are characterised by greater tension than ever seen before, it is partly because there is a clash between the perspectives of the traditional discourse and those of the new discourse on a number of religious issues, particularly the issues of religious freedom and religious equality. Many Malay-Muslims see a prominent non-Muslim role in the interreligious dialogue and religious pluralism movements in the country which they view rather negatively. Casting a negative role for the non-Muslims in these movements, especially for the Christians, in terms of their threats against Islam would only sharpen differences between the Muslim and the non-Muslim communities. The opposition by Malay-Muslims to the human rights discourse and the various movements associated with it, particularly religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, and Islamic feminism has emerged as an important factor in influencing interreligious relations in Malaysia. The general climate of religious tolerance in the country is going to depend much on the outcome of the present clash between the two discourses on a wide range of ethnic and religious issues.

Issues of Religious Tolerance: The Contemporary Public Perceptions

On the basis of opinions voiced by members of the public forum series held in all the states of Malaysia and on the basis of responses to questionnaires, we are furnished with a wide range of views and perceptions of religious tolerance in the country. Given the fact that participants in each forum in each state have been chosen to be as representative as possible of Malaysian society as a whole – its microcosm as it were – particularly in terms of ethnic and religious groups, gender, and age groups as displayed in the country’s demographic distributive pattern, it would be fairly accurate to say that the perceptions gathered at these forums are more or less those of the whole country itself. This section seeks to document the wide range of issues of religious tolerance in the country that have been identified by forum participants.

In order to provide a clear total picture of the field of religious tolerance in Malaysia as seen through the eyes of forum participants, we will try to present their views, perceptions, and suggestions in a systematic way. We will present them here under the following headings:

1. Their varied understandings (definitions and conceptions) and appreciations of religious tolerance as a cultural good.
Their assessment and evaluation of the current state of religious tolerance including on the basis of their own personal experiences, and their identification of factors favouring and arresting religious tolerance.

Suggested measures to advance religious tolerance.

Under the heading (1), we may emphasise the widely shared view among the participants that religious freedom is a good thing for the country. Religious tolerance is indeed a desirable cultural good, particularly for a multi-religious country like Malaysia. While no participant has rejected religious tolerance as an essentially bad idea, its meaning and boundaries or limits are very much contested. There is, however, a broad agreement among the participants on the need to emphasise common shared values and the universal aspects of religion.

The fundamental features of religious tolerance as mentioned by most participants include the following:

- Respect for other religions.
- The right and freedom to choose and practise one’s own religion.
- Understanding and acceptance of the common values expressed by all religions.
- The existence of a common understanding amongst the different religions.
- The ability to practise one’s religion without fear or worry.
- Acknowledging the different religions that exist with their own respective identities.
- Religious tolerance does not exclude limiting religious freedom so as to safeguard public peace.
- Allowing claims of ‘my religion is the best religion’ to be made.

Under heading (2) concerning the current state of religious tolerance we may mention first of all the widely shared perception that there has been deterioration in the quality of tolerance in the country. Religious tolerance in the first decade of independence was perceived to be better than it is now. Some participants attribute the deterioration to the increasing religiosity among Malay-Muslims but this attribution ignores the fact that increasing religiosity is also visible among the non-Muslim communities. Regional-wise, people from the state of Sabah in East Malaysia generally feel that they are more religiously tolerant than people of the other states. Those who provide a general assessment of religious tolerance in the country say that in doing so they are guided by three criteria, namely (a) the degree to which freedom of religion and respect for other religions is practised in society; (b) the level of understanding among religions; and (c) the level of inclusiveness or accommodation of other religious values for the purpose of developing social norms.
On the basis of these criteria and their own experiences and observations in daily lives, participants came up with the long list of attitudes, group behavioural patterns, prejudices, verbal expressions, including public pronouncements by religious and political figures, grievances, and complaints of the other, which in their view run counter to religious tolerance. The lack of respect for the religious sensitivities of the other communities such as those pertaining to food, dress, religious festivals, and worshipping habits is mentioned by many participants as still prevalent in Malaysian society. These various manifestations of lack of religious tolerance are to be seen in various areas of social life such as in workplaces, political gatherings, and even student campuses. Recent controversies arising from religious conversions, especially to Islam, that are not amicably resolved are also cited by some participants as manifestations of a lack of religious toleration among Malaysians.

In the general opinions of the participants, there are several main reasons why certain forms of religious intolerance are still prevalent. First, the level of mutual understanding of each other’s religion is still wanting. Second, and this is much emphasised by Muslim participants, there is too much negative publicity of Islam and the Muslims in the media which could have the impact of influencing non-Muslim perceptions of them. Third, in every religion, many of its followers are not aware of its positive teachings on religious tolerance. Fourth, the politicisation of religion at the hands of the politicians and extreme outbursts by some religious leaders is not conducive to religious tolerance. On the contrary, it tends to aggravate intolerance among some segments of the different religious communities.

As for the factors favouring the advancement of religious tolerance, participants have cited the following:

- Abundant opportunities for social interactions and intermingling between different ethnic and religious groups, including during religious festivals.
- A good and effective religious education at all levels of schooling and tertiary education.
- Openness to dialogues between followers of different religions with the view of enhancing mutual understanding.
- The promotion and adoption of common shared values and the universal aspects of religion.

Under heading (3) concerning measures to be taken to advance religious tolerance we may mention first of all that the various factors favouring religious tolerance that we have just cited may themselves be regarded as general recommendations for long term solutions to the problem of religious intolerance. We may next refer to the numerous suggestions by the participants, both specific and detailed, on how
to immediately go about promoting religious tolerance. These suggestions and recommendations include the need:

- to encourage the different ethnic and religious groups to have more frequent activities together while being sensitive to each other’s dietary preferences on religious grounds;
- to organise more interreligious dialogues;
- to ensure that inter-ethnic and interreligious intermingling begin from childhood days;
- to properly plan and administer the construction of houses of worship to minimise misunderstanding and friction between religious groups;
- for teachers to play role models in religious tolerance;
- to ensure that the court would be a place of last resort to settle disputes between religious groups;
- to settle religious grievances of all kinds through dialogue and consultation;
- to appeal to the political and community leaders to take a cautious line when making pronouncements on religious matters that touch the sensitivities of all religions.

Interpreting and Responding to the Public Perceptions

On the basis of the overall responses from the ‘microcosm’ of the Malaysian public under study we can say that they are generally committed to the idea and practice of religious tolerance. They are also emphatic in identifying it as a cultural imperative for Malaysia. They speak of the ideal characteristics of religious tolerance that should inspire Malaysians to strive for. Their diagnosis of its current state discloses many weaknesses and shortcomings that need to be addressed and overcome. So they suggest prescriptive measures, immediate and long-term, by both the state and the civil society to promote and advance tolerance. Their perceptions may not all correspond to the real situation and some of their prescriptions for religious tolerance are inappropriate or impractical in the Malaysian context but their strong commitment to its pursuit augurs well for the future of this country. There is much that the relevant authorities can benefit from these public perceptions. But the study’s findings have a message for all: politicians, religious and community leaders, educationists, town and city planners, youth leaders, and indeed every Malaysian who would like to see religious tolerance prevail in this country as a characteristic feature of its pluralistic culture.

Of interest is the view expressed by some participants concerning religious freedom. According to this view, the pursuit of religious tolerance does not exclude the possibility of limiting religious freedom so as to safeguard public order, peace
and security. Since a good number of participants consider religious freedom as a condition of religious tolerance, there is a need to further reflect on the above view. Like religious freedom to which it is closely linked, religious tolerance cannot be absolute. Religious tolerance is essentially about how much freedom and societal space the state can allow each religious community to express its beliefs and practices. In the earlier parts of this article I have referred to the constitutional provisions that define the limits or boundaries of religious freedom and religious tolerance in the Malaysian context.

In a religiously plural society, no religion can hope to enjoy a total freedom of public expression of its beliefs and practices as some or all of its followers wish. In Malaysia, many Muslims feel that as the sole official religion Islam should be fully practised and implemented by the community as well as by the state but in reality this is not the case much to the dismay of many Muslims. Similarly, many non-Muslims feel strongly that the Constitution entitles them to a complete freedom to practise and develop their respective religions without any impediment or constraint from the authorities. Again, the reality is different and much to their dismay.

From the point of view of the state, there have to be some forms of limitation to external religious freedom in order to safeguard public peace and security. Otherwise, religious feuds and conflicts would become rampant. But the limitations as in the Malaysian case are not as a result of a unilateral imposition by the state or some pressure groups. Rather, these are nationally agreed upon as part of a negotiated ‘social contract’. For the sake of religious tolerance there has to be a negotiated religious freedom. Anyhow, whenever we talk about religious freedom in the Malaysian context, we need to always bear in mind that the freedom is qualified by the constitutional provision on the status and role of Islam as the state religion and on the ‘indefinite’ societal space accorded to the other religions. But it is by no means clear how each space would affect the other if each religion were to be allowed to grow freely.

Policy Recommendations

- On the basis of our study presented in this article we would like the relevant authorities to work together with non-governmental bodies toward formulating a comprehensive national policy on interreligious relations that would focus on strategies on how to promote and advance religious tolerance.
- In accordance with the above objective the government, especially the Department of National Unity at the Prime Minister’s Department, is urged to set up a panel of experts on interreligious relations to help draft the required policy.
Once set up, the panel of experts is advised to make the best use of all research and study reports available thus far, Malaysian and foreign, on issues of international relations and religious tolerance, especially the Asia Foundation report discussed in this article.

Notes


2. In my view, the Qur’ān is supportive of the idea of a spiritual space shared among the different originally revealed religions. In many of its verses, the Qur’ān speaks of itself as affirming many spiritual truths that have been revealed to the earlier Prophets. It is the common spiritual truths contained in the world’s religious scriptures and in the cosmologies and psychologies of the different religious traditions that define a shared spiritual space for the different religions. This means that the Qur’ān would be in a position to significantly contribute to an enlightened national policy on interreligious relations. For a discussion of the significance of a shared spiritual space for the pluralistic global community of our times see Osman Bakar, “Challenges to Dialogues of Civilisations and Ways of Overcoming Them”, in: Thomas W. Simon and Azizan Baharuddin (eds), Dialogues of Civilisations and the Construction of Peace (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, 2008), 27–35.

3. Since we are speaking of the issue of religion in the public space in the Malaysian context where Islam is accepted as the only state religion and the undesirability of exclusivist interpretations of religion in the public space it is pertinent to ask the question whether Islam is an inclusive or exclusive religion. We understand an exclusive religion to mean one which does not recognise the existence of spiritual truths in the other religions. In contrast, an inclusive religion recognises the presence of such truths in other religions. It may even recognise the possibility of salvation outside itself. In our view, Islam is the most inclusive religion, and it is by virtue of this character which is far more important than any other factor such as the historical and the demographic that we should seek to justify the place and role of Islam as the state religion. Contrary to the view of some Muslims, Islam is in favour of a common public space for the different religions. Islam’s inclusivist spirit would be of great help in the creation of such a space. For a discussion on the position of Islam pertaining to the issue of exclusivity and inclusivity in religious beliefs and practices, see Osman Bakar, “Exclusive and Inclusive Islam in the Qur’an: Implications for Muslim–Jewish Relations”, Journal of the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions 5 (February 2009), 4–15, also available online at http://www.cismor.jp/en/publication/jismor/documents/JISMOR5en_Bakar.pdf (accessed on 14 March 2011).

4. The concept of ‘common public space’ is much broader than that of ‘shared spiritual space’ referred to earlier. The two spaces are of different kinds and natures. The former type of space is cultural in nature and the latter spiritual. Some of the common cultural elements may not be believers in religion or spiritual realities. But the Qur’ān appears to be supportive of the creation of a common public space well. However, it does not speak of just one single common public space. Rather, it speaks of several of them. There is a common public space for the Muhammadan ummah, another one for the Muslims and the ‘People of the Book’ (ahl al-kitāb) and yet another for the whole human family or the global community. The qur’ānic idea of common public space is defined primarily in terms of the ‘common good’ and ‘common beliefs’ acceptable to all the participants in that public space. It expresses the idea of the common good through such terms as al-khayrāt (e.g. 2:148) and al-maʿrūf (e.g. 3:104, 3:110). It expresses the idea of common beliefs through the use of the term kalimatin sawā’ (3:64), meaning the ‘common word’. The message contained in this verse has inspired a group of leading Muslim
scholars to initiate in 2007 a series of Muslim–Christian dialogues. Thanks to this initiative, the term ‘common word’ has become famous. For a discussion of the Qur’anic ideas of the common good and common beliefs, see Osman Bakar, The Qur’an on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue: Interpreting a Divine Message for Twenty-First Century Humanity (Kuala Lumpur: IITM and ISUGU, 2006).

5. We need to hear what each of the major world religions has to say about religious tolerance. A comparative treatment of the subject of ‘religious tolerance’ is most welcome, but this kind of work is still rare. For one of these few works, see Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (eds), Religious Tolerance in World Religions (West Conshohocken PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008).

6. This writer has argued elsewhere that this capacity for recognition and respect of religious differences, which in an individual is not constant but a variable, is a function of knowledge and thus related to cultural literacy. Consequently, religious tolerance is also an indicator of cultural and civilisational achievement. See Osman Bakar, “Challenges to Dialogues”, 25–31.

7. In the Federal Constitution, ‘Malay’ is defined as a Muslim who speaks the Malay language and practises the ‘Malay customs’.

8. On the Tunku’s Islam Policy, see this writer’s Viewpoint in this same issue of the Journal, entitled “Identifying the Islam-Policies of the Predecessors of the Najib Administration: Has He Abandoned Tradition?”

9. The non-Malay bumiputeras refer to the indigenous ethnic groups in the states of Sabah and Sarawak such as the Kadazan, the Dusun, and the Dayak with hundreds of sub-ethnic groups, the biggest of which is the Iban.

10. Although forum participants have been given some guidelines on how to approach their discussion of the issues of religious tolerance they were given the freedom to also discuss them from other angles not specified in the guidelines. A good number of the participants actually exercised this freedom and, generally speaking, they have done so in a fairly responsible way.