Exploring the Perception of Religious Pluralism Issues among Private University’s Students

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Abstract

This paper focus on the issue of religious pluralism in the context of accepting the beliefs taught by religions other than one’s own as valid. The objective of the study is to explore the perceptions of students in a private university in Malaysia pertaining the issue of religious pluralism. Through the distribution 500 sets of questionnaires, the findings shows that most of the respondents have not heard, read or aware about the religious pluralism issues. However, most of them prove to have the same idealism on the issue as what has been promoted by the group whom believe in religious pluralism. Nonetheless, few of the respondents had agreed not accept the claims and retrograde ideology brought about by the originator and supporter of religious pluralism concept. This findings may serve as a reference on the fact of reality pertaining to the issue. This may trigger further actions and initiatives by regulatory bodies in educating and handling the situation.

Key words: religious pluralism, private university, Malaysia
JEL Classification: C19, G13, G14
1. Religious Pluralism and Islamic View

For years, in Malaysia people of different religions has been co-exist in peaceful and mutually respect with understanding. However, it is still remain institutionally separate which it is described as religious pluralism. This the religious pluralism has been used in social science studies and defined as a diversity or heterogeneity, which means a simple recognition of the fact that there are many different religious groups active in any given geo-political space under consideration and that there is a condition of harmonious co-existence between followers of different religions (Yaacob 2011). In other circumstances, the terms represent the form of ecumenism where individuals of different religions dialogue and learn from each other without attempting to convince each other of the correctness of their individual set of beliefs. And finally the terms also represent accepting the beliefs taught by religions other than one’s own as valid, but not necessarily true (Yaacob 2011), which will be the interest of this paper. The first two definition will not be part of the discussion in this study.

During the 2006 Ulama Convention in the Perak state, the mufti from Perak, Harussani Zakaria warned against pluralism and liberalism in his keynote speech. He said, “If left unchecked, liberalism and pluralism will be difficult to control.” He added that “Muslims, whether policymakers or ordinary people, should know that liberalism and pluralism were alien to the fundamentals of Islam” and warned against “the threats to Islam posed by these elements” (Yeoh 2006, pg. 23). In December 2010, the mufti highlighted in Utusan Malaysia, that the believe in religious pluralism by claiming that all religion are equally good and equally true, by any Muslims, is an infidel and an apostate. He mentioned that such a notion is clearly illegal and contrary to the teachings of Islam brought by Prophet Muhammad (Utusan, 2010).

The thought of religious pluralism has emerged since the 18th century at the era of European enlightenment. It is a religious philosophy introduced by John Hicks in his book An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendence (John Hick, 1989). Hicks described religious pluralism as a doctrine of salvation, and is contrasted with two earlier Christian views of the matter, termed by Hick exclusivism and inclusivism. In simplistic terms, the question is: ‘who is to be allowed to go to heaven’? The exclusivist answers that it is only those of his own faith who can reach heaven, in contrast inclusivity would open the doors to heaven a bit wider to allow for the admission of other religion practitioners (Legenhausen n.d.). Thoha (2005) stated that religious pluralism existed as a result of several modern intellectual reaction to the notion of absolute truth and salvation exist in every religion. The claim of all religion are right brings continuous conflict with each other. This has led to the birth of reactions and ideas that is towards the socio - political rather than the truth religious issues promoted by the liberals and secularists.
Another work by Thoha (2010) concluded that religious pluralism was born from the democracy idealism, which emphasis the value and principles of democracy itself. Among the properties which are most visible and prominent in this school of thoughts pertaining religious pluralism are as follows:

i. Equality: it teaches all religions are equal and equivalent, there is no best and no worst.

ii. Liberalism or freedom: the freedom to choose the religion, in the sense of one may choose to convert from one religion to another on his own will. For example, a person may be a Muslims today and may change to be a Christian on another day.

iii. Relativism: the perception of the religion of truth is relative, depending on individual interpretation.

iv. Reductionism. the act of performing religious activities is one private affairs

As recommended in Islamic teaching, all Muslims are allowed to respects other religion, but they are prohibited to recognize those religions to be equal as Islam. This is clearly stated in the Holy Quran the legitimacy of Islam as the one rightful religion in Surah Al Imran:

\[
إنَّ الْدِينَ عِندَ اللَّهِ الإِسْلَامُ وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِن بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعَلَمُ بَيْنَهُمْ وَمَن يَكَفُّرْ بَيْنَ وَجْهِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعُ الْحَسَابِ
\]

Truly, the religion with Allah is Islam. Those who were given the Scripture (Jews and Christians) did not differ except, out of mutual jealousy, after knowledge had come to them. And whoever disbelieves in the Ayat (proofs, evidences, verses, signs, revelations, etc.) of Allah, then surely, Allah is Swift in calling to account.

(QS 3:19).

The above verse clearly stated that Islam may never be claimed to be the same as other religion as Allah the Almighty only accept Islam as the one and true religion. However, Islam is a religion which full of justice. There is no compulsion in religion for those who are yet to become a Muslim. It is also clearly stated in the Holy Quran for Muslims to respects other non-believers and allow them to perform their ritual activities. This is stated in the last verse of Surah Al-Kafiroon:

\[
لَكُمُ دِينُكُمُ وَلِيَ دِينِ
\]

"To you be your religion, and to me my religion (Islamic Monotheism)." (QS 109:6)

The above verses shows that plurality is recognized in Islam but not religious pluralism. Plurality refers to the diversity of religion, culture and belief which existed in this world, whereas pluralism is claiming the similarity of all religions, positioning Islam as the same as other religion. The main argument here is the issue of one faith. Respecting other religions may not create any harm as long it will not interfere the faithfulness of one Muslims to his
belief. Islam even forbid the Muslims to insult other religion as stated in the Holy Quran in the Surah Al-An’am:

وَلَّ تَسُبُّوا الَّذِينَ يَدإعُونَ مِن دُونِ اللََِّّ فًََاسُبُّوا اللَََّ عَدإواا بًَِْإرِ عِلإمٍ كَذََٰلِكَ زَيَّنَّا لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ عَمَلَُُ مإ ُُمَّ إِلَٰ َٰ رَب ُِِم مَّرإجِعُُُمإ فًَُنَب ِئُُُم بِمَا كَانُوا يَعإمَلُونَ

And insult not those whom they (disbelievers) worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge. Thus We have made fair-seeming to each people its own doings; then to their Lord is their return and He shall then inform them of all that they used to do. (QS 6:108)

However, in today scenario, people may misunderstood the purity of Islam and its values. The lack of knowledge and willingness to investigate deeply on the issue may produce another serious issues and problems. The very thin line of misunderstanding on the concept of pluralism may jeopardize one’s faith, which eventually will resulting one become apostate. It is crucial to create the awareness and enhance the knowledge pertaining this issue to ensure, the Muslims not only to be part of religious pluralism, but also to educate others in the subject matter.

The next section will discuss on the empirical study pertaining the religious pluralism issues. Section three will describe the methodology adopted to achieve the study objectives and will be followed with the findings section. The discussion and conclusion will be discussed in the later part of this paper.

2. The Perception of Religious Pluralism: An Exploratory Study

The second section of this paper will be reporting on the empirical study carried out by the researcher in understanding the actual scenario on the understanding of religious pluralism. This filed research was carried out in order to gain more understanding on the level of awareness and understanding pertaining this issue in Malaysia. It has raised the concern of the Islamic scholars on the threat of religious pluralism among the young generation. Number of initiatives has been taken by the Islamic authorities in order to stem the spread of such belief. Not limited to public lectures, seminars, conferences and also the content of certain subjects in higher learning institution has incorporated the issue to increase public awareness and enhance their knowledge. Hence, the objectives of this empirical study is in threefold. First, the study attempt to evaluate the understanding and awareness on the religious issue. Secondly, it is to investigate the perception of the respondents pertaining the relativism and liberalism issues, which is part of the religious pluralism teachings. To add more value to this study, the perception towards the issue of the noun of ALLAH to be used by non-Muslims is also included.
2.1 Sample Selection and Data Collection

The sample of respondents in this study are drawn from the students whom currently enrolled in the one of the Malaysian private university. Out of 500 students contacted email, only 128 students willing to participate in the survey. In order to gather the information, this study developed a set of questionnaires which is divided into two sections. The first section is regarding the respondents’ demographic information such as their age, gender and the type previous secondary school. The second section consist of 14 questions which items related to the key issues on the perception, awareness and influence of religious pluralism. The respondents are required to rate the statement based on a five-point Likert-scale (1=strongly disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= neither disagree nor agree; 4=Agree; 5=strongly agree).

The questionnaire was sent via email to the respondents which was commenced in March 2015. After two weeks a friendly reminder email was sent again and the last reminder was sent a month after the first email was sent to the respondent. All answered questionnaires received from the respondents are used for further analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Respondent Background

The first part of the questionnaire contains questions pertaining the respondents’ demographic information. This includes their gender, age and previous secondary school. More than 73% of the respondents are female and at the age of 18 to 23 year olds with majority were previously from national-type secondary school. Less than 10% of them received their secondary education from Islamic religious school. This information is relevant as respondents who received Islamic education are assumed to possess more understanding on Islamic knowledge.

3.2 Descriptive analysis

The findings from the second part of the questionnaires will be discussed based on the objectives of the study.

3.2.1 The Awareness and Understanding of Religious Pluralism

The first objective of this survey is to investigate the level of awareness and understanding of religious pluralism among the students in Malaysia private university. Four questions were asked to the respondents in measuring this objective. Overall, the findings indicates that, more exposure are needed to enhance their awareness and understanding about religious pluralism (mean 3.08 = Neutral). Due to lack of this, they may not confirm the differences between pluralism and religious tolerance and also the view of necessity for religious pluralism in Malaysia. However, the respondents almost agreed on the notions that religious pluralism may erode the confidence of faith purity (mean= 3.43, between neutral and agree). Table 1 further explain the findings for this subtheme.
Table 1: The awareness and understanding of religious pluralism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I’ve heard and read the terms Religious Pluralism</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Religious pluralism has the potential to erode the confidence in the purity of faith and religion</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>the concept of religious pluralism is NOT similar to religious tolerance</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>In the context of a multiple ethnicity in Malaysia, the understanding of religious pluralism has NOT becomes a necessity</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.2 The perception on religious relativism

As mentioned earlier, religion relativism is part of the religious pluralism teaching. In order to gain some view on this issue, four questions were asked to respondents. In overall, the findings shows that respondents agreed to reject the notions pertaining to religion relativism (mean=3.69). They confirm their faith by agreeing that the religion they follow is the rightful religion. In this instant, all respondents are Muslims, hence they confirmed that they are in right path (mean = 4.72). Table 2 further explain the findings of the sub-theme.

Table 2: Perception on religious relativism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I DO NOT believe that all religions are true</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I believe that my religion is the rightful religion</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>0.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I believe in the truth of every religion is NOT relative but rather absolute</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1.192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>All religions are NOT equally same although they advocate for goodness</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.3 Perception on religious Liberalism

The next sub-theme is about the respondents’ perception towards the freedom in converting to other religion. Three questions were asked to measure this categories and the findings shows that the respondents agreed to reject religious liberalism (mean = 4.08). The findings shows, the respondents possess a good understanding on the status of Islam as the superlative religion and do not allow the follower to accept the teaching of other religions which are not similar to Islam. The following table further explain on the findings.

Table 3: Perception on religious liberalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>An individual must NOT agree and DO NOT accept other religion apart of his religion</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>My religion DO NOT give me the freedom to change to other religion</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The implementation of religious teaching is NOT impersonal</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2.4 The usage of the noun ‘ALLAH’ issue

The study further attempt to explore the respondents view pertaining the use of the noun ‘ALLAH’ by another religion than Islam. This issue had captured the public attention and the findings may contribute to the public on the actual perception of the young generation in regards of the issue. Three questions were asked to the respondents to rate the statements. In overall, the respondents confirms that Allah Almighty is the God for all humans and nature, and the name should not be used by other religion as it may create confusion (overall mean = 4.02). Hence, to uphold the purity and divine of Islam, the findings shows that the respondents do not agree to accept the usage of the noun “Allah” by others. Table 4 further indicate the findings.

Table 4: perception on the usage of the noun ‘Allah’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The noun of &quot;Allah&quot; refers only to God who is believed by Muslims, and should not be used by other religion</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>1.298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The use of the noun &quot;Allah&quot; by the other religion than Islam, will messed the God identity himself</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I believe that Allah is the God of all humans and nature, not only for Muslims</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>4.02</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Conclusion

Religious pluralism had capture much attention long time ago. In the context of Malaysia, the issue was raised during the Ulama convention back in year 2006. Number of initiatives has been taken by the authorities inclusive through the academic approach in creating the awareness and knowledge on religious pluralism. Looking from the view of Islam, it is clearly stated that Islam do not accept such view, claiming all religion are the same, as the only religion accepted by Allah is Islam. However, Muslims are required to respects others belief as long as it will not affect ones faith. At this point, there is still remain unknown how the public, especially the young generation perceive this issue. Hence, there is a need to carry out an empirical research to investigate the issue.

With the objective to evaluate the perception of the students in Malaysia private university towards the issue of religious pluralism, this study utilized a self-administered questionnaire in order to gather the information. As liberalism and relativism was categorized as part of religious pluralism teachings, in the set of 14 questions, 128 sets of questionnaires were sent to Muslims students. They were requested to rate their perceptions on the issue based on Likert scale measurement.

The findings can be concluded in such view that the respondents are somehow had the knowledge and awareness pertaining religious pluralism. However, the terms is quite alien to them. In overall, the respondents do not agree with all the notions for liberalism and
relativism apart of they conclude that the noun “Allah” should not be shared with other religion.

The respondents of this study are consist of the Muslims students in one of the private university Malaysia. The result may not reflect the whole population of the nation. Hence, future research is encourage to include multiple religion and background of respondents from various institutions which may further explain the situations. As this study is only descriptive in nature, future study should also consider to test the correlation of possible determinants of such perception on religious pluralism. Finally, this study only relies on a single research method, which is through the distribution of questionnaires. Although this approach may be sufficient to achieve the objectives of this research, employing various methods would enrich the findings and alleviate the possibilities of bias.

References
AL Quran Kareem.