

Muhibah is Not Religious Pluralism: The Understanding of Religious Coexistence among Religious Leaders in Malaysia¹

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Abstract

Muhibah is a social philosophy on pluralistic coexistence in Malaysia. It has a profound historical background that deserves to be learnt and appreciated by the Malaysian people and its leaders. Religious pluralism however, is a philosophy developed by John Hick as a response against the Christian exclusive interpretation of the doctrine of salvation. Ironically, of late, there has been a global call which persistently promotes religious pluralism as the philosophy of the day. In

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1. The article is part of the findings of a research conducted from July 2013 to November 2015. It was funded by the Ministry of Education in Malaysia titled *An Explorative Study For Fostering “Muhibah-Led Policies, Programs And Modules” (MPPM) Among Religious Followers In Malaysia: A Systematic Approach To Challenging Religious Pluralism.*

Malaysia, the awareness and support for religious pluralism emerged among the religious NGOs at the beginning of the 21st century. Since then, there has been persistent propagation of religious pluralism in Malaysia. *Muhibah* on the other hand, remain as a blueprint on unity and national integration in the government policy. This article tries to provide a theoretical and historical comparison between the two terms to understand their meaning and historical significance. The article also shares some of a research findings on 14 religious leaders' understanding of *muhibah* and religious pluralism. Their understanding is analysed and compared to gauge which of the two terms (according to them) better relates to religious coexistence in Malaysia. The article reports the research findings which record higher understanding of *muhibah* compared to religious pluralism. It is therefore suggested that *muhibah* is a better philosophy for understanding of religious coexistence in this country.

Keywords

Coexistence; pluralism; inter-ethnic relations; religious tolerance; unity.

Introduction

A quick survey on Malaysian Thesis Online; a database for Academic thesis and dissertation written in Malaysia since 1960 indicated two important facts relevant to this paper; first, *muhibah* did not appear as an independent research title since 1960 and second, there are three research titles explicitly on religious pluralism with the first research recorded in 2005.² There is hardly a book written on *muhibah* until the publication of a recent work titled *Religion and Pluralistic Co-Existence, The Muhibbah Perspective* which is originally a collection of seminar papers. Other form

2. The titles are “Diversity Of Religions: An Assessment Of The Christian And Muslim Encounters With The Philosophy Of Religious Pluralism”, “Pro Kontra Dalam Pluralisme Agama : Kajian Terhadap Konflik Sosial Keagamaan Dan Sikap Toleransi Beragama Di Indonesia”, “Pluralisme Agama Menurut Perspektif Al-Quran”.

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of inputs on *muhibah*, most of them, are found online such as article, conference paper, government document along with writings by netizens representing individual opinion or particular organisation. Religious pluralism, however, receives global attention within academic research since its first appearance in 1985 in the work of John Hick titled *Problems of Religious Pluralism*. This is understandable because religious pluralism is a philosophy developed from within an academic setting, *Muhibah* on the other hand was a Malaysian governmental policy introduced in 1969 by YAM Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj. *Muhibah* worked as a reconciliatory measure to recover an inter-ethnic crisis;³ a problem that have caused and continue to cause social anxiety in Malaysia.

It is unclear how YAM Tunku Abdul Rahman got to be inspired to introduce such a profound term and yet overlooked by the academia. Nevertheless, historically, the term has been instrumental in promoting Malaysian unity through government institutions, commencing from Majlis *Muhibah* Negara (National Goodwill Council) in 1970 which later on evolved into *Majlis Perpaduan Negara* (National Integration Council). A year later it was upgraded as the Ministry of National Integration. In 1974 it was transformed into *Lembaga Perpaduan Negara* (Board of National Unity) under the Department of the Prime Minister and was reestablished as a department in 1983. In 2004 it was renamed as *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional* (JPNIN – Department of National Unity and Integration) and placed under the care of the Prime Minister's Department. At present, *muhibah* stays in the blueprint as the vision and mission of the department. As a policy, *muhibah* continues to aspire Malaysians to living in coexistence. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that *muhibah* has not been given serious attention in research by the academia despite the forte it has in the Malaysian history.

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3. We are referring to an inter-ethnic crisis between the Malays and the Chinese on 13th May 1969. The crisis has been variously interpreted and reported. Some reports blamed the wealth unequal distribution that brought economic gap between the two ethnics. Other reports charged that it was the political manoeuvrer of the government of the day that intentionally incited the racial insurgence as part of its plan to sustain power.

From a local term, we move to religious pluralism; a philosophy coined and propagated by a Christian theologian, John Hick (1922-2012). It is a philosophy for understanding the different truth-claims made by religions. Originally, Hick was reacting against the exclusive doctrine in Christianity which held that Christianity is the only religion of salvation. In contradiction, Hick, held the idea that different religions offer different paths to salvation.⁴ Religious pluralism according to Hick is a philosophy that enable “the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness that is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions”. Hick believed that “there is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation”.⁵ Religious pluralism proposes a transformation in Christian theology of other religions. It is promoted as a global theology to discard exclusivism which is claimed to be a prevalent position in many religions apart from Christianity.

In Malaysia, religious pluralism did not really capture the local interest until 2010. When Anwar Ibrahim offered his speech titled “Religion and Pluralism in a Divided World” at the London School of Economics (LSE) on 18 March 2010, there was a nationwide response. Anwar had received considerable support from human-rights activists and strong rejection from Muslim religious activists and religious agencies in Malaysia.⁶ To the Muslims, religious pluralism’s ardent call for “the many paths to salvation” is challenging its’ cardinal belief of *Tawhīd* that rejects for any association to Allāh (*al-shirk*). On the other hand,

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4. In Catholicism, this doctrine is known as *extra ecclesiam nullas salus* (no salvation outside the church). In Protestantism, the doctrine is represented via five principles of salvation; *sola fide, sola scriptura, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli deo gloria*.
 5. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p.34.
 6. The Malaysian government resisted against the philosophy and several government agencies such as JAKIM and IKIM have been responsible in explaining the philosophy to the public through academic discourses, press statements and the mainstream media. *Fatwa* against religious pluralism has been issued by the Majlis Fatwa Selangor on 31 July 2014 on its prohibition. Refer to rejection of it <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/muslim-womens-group-to-challenge-fatwa-against-liberalism-pluralism>

the human right activists have been consistently criticising the government for lack of individual rights and religious freedom in Malaysia.⁷

The questions at hands are, which one of the two terms; *muhibah* and religious pluralism, that best fits the Malaysian context? Given that both terms concern with coexistence, to what extent are they understood and practised in Malaysia? The article seeks to report the views of religious leaders in Malaysia. Their views are prioritised on three assumptions; first; they are better educated and exposed with both terms, second; based on their significant role, they are instrumental in shaping the views of their own communities, and third; they play a direct role in cultivating positive relations with other religions. In this regard, it was postulated that the views of religious leaders on *muhibah* and religious pluralism will lead to a meaningful comparison on the viability of the two terms in Malaysia.

***Muhibah*⁸ and Religious Pluralism as Academically Perceived in Malaysia**

An exhaustive account of *muhibah* is found in *Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The Muhibah Perspective*.⁹ Another significant writing that explores *muhibah* is written by Vijayan P. Munusamy titled *Ethnic Relations In Malaysia: The Need for “Constant Repair” in the Spirit of Muhibbah*.¹⁰ *Muhibah* is claimed as derived from an Arabic word *ḥubb* that signifies a universal meaning which is love or affection. In the Malay usage, it is *muhibah* instead of *maḥabbah* (if the Arabic

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7. The issues pertaining to human rights have been consistently debated particularly against the roles of the Syariah Court in Malaysia, particularly on the right of Muslims/Malays to change religion and the right to exercise religious freedom.
 8. *Muhibah* is also spelled as *muhibbah*. However, the standard spelling documented by the Institute of Language and Literature Malaysia is *muhibah*.
 9. Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, *Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The Muhibah Perspective* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2010).
 10. Vijayan P. Munusamy, “Ethnic Relations In Malaysia: The Need for “Constant Repair” in the Spirit of Muhibbah” in D. Landis, R. D. Albert (eds.), *Handbook of ethnic conflict: an international Perspective* (New York: Springer, 2012), p. 134.

origin is to be considered) which means mutual love or the state of loving each other, it is the love that puts off hatred and anger. Interestingly, in English, *muhibah* is translated as goodwill which yields the meaning of friendly, helpful or altruistic.

Kamar Oniah deliberated that *muhibah* signifies coexistence, togetherness, of kinship, love and affection, sympathy and empathy, respect and decorum.¹¹ *Muhibah* is promoted on the basis of agreement and sincerity of accepting each other among Malaysians. As a social philosophy, *muhibah* focuses on the relationship between individuals and society. Munusamy establishes that *muhibah* is not limited to the media definition of *muhibah* such as;

Muhibbah festival open houses, *muhibbah* dinners, *muhibbah* durian parties etc that may confuse the genuine meaning of *muhibbah*. *Muhibbah* has to be embedded in daily life with the understanding that this is a life-long journey.¹²

Having linking *muhibah* with the Arabic term *hubb* however may not necessarily lead to a desirable objective. Though it is widely known that many words in the Malay language found its origin in the arabic word, the link between the two words may not be welcomed by certain quarters who are skeptical of Islamisation in Malaysia. Perhaps it is better to introduce *muhibah* as a purely Malay term for it appeals more to the Malaysian history and context. In addition, love, respect, coexistence and togetherness promoted in *muhibah* are universal values recognised not exclusively in Islam but also in other religions. It is therefore essential to advocate *muhibah* as a shared value among Malaysians instead of grappling with an ownership claim.

As a matter of fact, the social reality in Malaysia demonstrates *muhibah*. Every religious follower is free to maintain his culture and tradition; identity, belief, language, and way of life. In fact ethnic-based education is allowed to respect for the needs to preserve one's language and culture. The followers of

11. Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, *Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence*, p. x, 18, 22 & 23..

12. Vijayan P. Munusamy, "Ethnic Relations In Malaysia", p. 134.

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religion in Malaysia are also free to practise their religious beliefs in terms of constructing places of worship and conducting rites and rituals. In fact, religious festivals of major religions are celebrated as public holidays. Such diversity is analogous with an ingredient of a salad bowl that every type of salad is able to maintain its' identity though they are well-mixed in the bowl.¹³ The salad bowl recipe portrays togetherness of the pluralistic society and at the same time, every entity resumes its original identity of religion and culture.

At present, the term *muhibah* continues to work as the main agenda of JPNIN. On 24th February 2010, the cabinet has agreed to establish the 'Committee to Promote Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Adherents' (JKMPKA) that upholds *muhibah* as part of its vision and mission.¹⁴ In fact, *muhibah* has been the foundation of the values adhered to by the JKMPKA. There are seven value-pillars extracted from the word *muhibah*; *Musyawarah* (dialogue), *Ukhuwwah* (kinship), *Harmoni* (harmony), *Ikhlas* (sincerity), *Bersangka-baik* (mutual-trust), *Amanah* (Integrity) and *Hormat* (respect). Apart from the theoretical meaning and interpretation offered by Kamar Oniah, it remains unclear how the values can be operationalised in strategic manner.

The narrative of religious pluralism in Malaysia is as controversial as John Hick, its promulgator. Hick, a Presbyterian theologian tried to reformulate the Christian understanding of salvation. He accused that the doctrine of salvation is promoting exclusivism in Christianity.¹⁵ Hick claimed that exclusivism is responsible for cultivating the idea of the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity. Dared to risk condemnation as a heretic, Hick propagated a new way for understanding the doctrine of Incarnation. He called it "inhistorisation" which necessitated that the doctrine be understood as symbolical or

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13. The salad bowl theory is introduced by the American sociologists to explain its cultural diversity due to massive immigrations into the country.
 14. The vision is "Towards harmony and *Muhibah*" and the mission statement is "towards making dialogue as mechanism and mediation to realise understanding and harmony relationship among religions towards making Malaysia a *Muhibah* state.
 15. Exclusivism in his view is a position which hold the idea that there is only one absolute truth in religion. Other truth-claims put forward by religions are false and illegitimate.

metaphorical or mythical rather than literal.”¹⁶ Hick also claimed that the traditional argument (of substance and hypostatic union of Jesus and God) was outdated and misleading. Hick also regarded that perceiving the bread and wine during Eucharist as metaphysical rather than real. Inhistorisation posed the idea that the divine Agape (love) has embodied itself in human actions. God in Christ is not acted upon or into human history, but acted within and through man’s life. Incarnation is the divine purpose of Agape that discloses itself in the life of Jesus.¹⁷ In reality, it is God’s love becoming incarnate in Jesus to overcome the despair of original sin. Hick’s attempt had gained support from some Christian theologians. They worked on a book titled *The Myth of God Incarnate*. The work received furious responses from the churches and it was considered heretical.¹⁸

In order to justify the universality of religious pluralism, Hick claimed that his philosophy is inspired by the utterances of Muslim Sufis such as ‘the lamps are different the light is the same, it comes from beyond’ of Jalaluddin al-Rumi.¹⁹ In fact, Hick acknowledged a few Muslim Sufis of the 13th and 14th centuries, for example *Muhy al-Dīn Ibn Arabī*, and *al-Junayd al-Baghdādī*, who taught that the divine light is refracted through many human lenses.²⁰ Hick also referred to Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and Evelyn Underhill, accentuating their mystical experiences in encountering the transcendent god.²¹ For example, Meister

16. John Hick, *Problems Of Religious Pluralism*. London: Macmillan, 1985, p.11.

17. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, London: Macmillan, 1988, p. 152

18. For a full account on the controversial issue of the work, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, refer to Hick, *Problem of Religious Pluralism*, p. 11-15. In his autobiography, he justified that myth does not mean false, but it does not express literal truth though it point to some important reality. Hick has received grave criticism especially from the Anglican churches.

19. R.A. Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1950), p.166. M.M.Gupta, (Trans.) *Maulana Rumi’s Mathnāwī* (Agra: MG Publishers & Book, 1990), p. 90, John Hick has cited this poem in many of his works such as *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 145. *An Interpretation Of Religion*, p. 233, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 37.

20. John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 36.

21. Hick quoted few utterances that these Christian mystics unconsciously made during their deep spiritual meditation practices. For a review of such utterances, refer to Hick, *Disputed Question in Theology*, p. 25-28. See also *An Interpretation*, p. 292-294.

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Eckhart said “when the divine light pours into the soul, the soul is united with God, as light blends with light.”²²

Considering Hick’s claims, it is crucial to acknowledge that religious pluralism is a philosophy arises from within Christian theology as a response against exclusivism. It is also important to note that religious pluralism does not simply mean acceptance to plurality of religions. Following Hick, religious pluralism runs the risk of leveling the Truth in all religions based on his view that the Truth is merely human interpretation of the Ultimate Truth (*the Real an-sich*).

Nevertheless, there has been support for religious pluralism on the view that it refers to religious plurality. The Harvard project commenced in 1991 and led by Diana L. Eck is one of the best examples. As at present, there are a number of interpretations given to religious pluralism. Lewis E. Winkler in *Contemporary Muslim & Christian Responses to Religious Plurality* acknowledges that Hick’s view on religious pluralism has been popularised. However, there has been proliferations in the pluralist perspectives and Winkler chosed to differentiate between religious plurality and religious pluralism. He prefers the former “to avoid any confusion with Hick and other pluralists.” He defines religious plurality as refering to the sociological reality of the presence of many major religious views (usually in close proximity) without necessarily evaluating this situation in any theological or philosophical manner.²³

In Malaysia, religious pluralism may have some contributions to the complexities of inter-religious issues. For example, there has been demand to use the word “Allah” by the Sidang Injil Borneo Church in their publications. There is also an extended lawsuit against the prohibition made to the Christian churches from using the Malay translation of the Bible. There is also an ongoing dilemma on religious freedom following the restriction to Muslims from leaving Islam in the Federal Constitution and in the Syari’ah rulings. As a matter of fact, there is a strong taboo within the Malay culture on Muslims who apostate.

22. As cited by Hick, *Disputed Question in Theology*, p. 26.

23. Lewis E. Winkler, *Contemporary Muslim and Christian Responses to Religious Plurality: Wolfhart Pannenberg in Dialogue with Abdalaziz Sachedina* (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke, 2012), p. 12-13.

Thus, Anwar Ibrahim support for religious pluralism has added more spices to these issues. Religious pluralism became widely discoursed by academics and received considerable support from human-rights activists with an equally strong rejection from Muslim religious activists in Malaysia.²⁴ Among the local academics who accept the plain meaning of religious pluralism as religious plurality are Osman Bakar, Mohamed Fauzi Yaacob and Yeoh Seng Guan.²⁵ As a matter of fact, academic publications which carry such understanding are escalating.²⁶ In addition, many religious NGOs succumb to the plain meaning and ignore its philosophical significance. A few Muslims' NGOs invested their energy in explaining the philosophy and the manner it offends the Muslims' faith.²⁷

The main reason why religious pluralism is rejected is due to the understanding that all religions are the same and valid paths to salvation. This is against the cardinal faith of Islam and may risk the sin of apostasy.²⁸ The government and its religious agencies have also resisted against the philosophy and this has greatly offended the human-rights activists in Malaysia who claimed that there is lack of freedom of religion in Malaysia.

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24. The issues pertaining to human rights has been consistently debated particularly against the roles of the Syariah Court in Malaysia particularly on the right for a Muslim/Malay to change his religion, the right to exercise religious freedom.
25. Refer to Osman Bakar, "Interfaith Dialogue as a New Approach in Islamic Education", *Islam and Civilisational Renewal*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July 2010), pp. 700-704. Mohamed Fauzi Yaacob, "The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia", *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, Vol. 21, 2011, Yeoh Seng Guan, "Actually existing religious pluralism in Kuala Lumpur". In Chiara Formichi (ed.) *Religious Pluralism, State and Society in Asia* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014).
26. The examples of such works are Rita Camilleri, "Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: The Journey of Three Prime Ministers", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 24, Iss. 2, 2013. Andrew Harding, "Malaysia: Religious Pluralism and the Constitution in a Contested Polity" in *Middle East Law and Governance*, Vol. 4. Issue 2-3, 2012.
27. Among the Muslim NGOs are ISMA and *Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia* (MUAFAKAT). The latter published at least three books against the philosophy which are; *Pluralisme Agama: Satu Gerakan Iblis Memurtadkan Ummah*, *Pluralisme Agama Di Alam Melayu – Satu Ancaman Kepada Kesejahteraan Umat* and *Falsafah Agama John Hick: Pengamatan Dari Kacamata Ajaran Ahli Sunnah wal-Jamaah*.
28. <https://akarimomar.wordpress.com/2011/03/18/kenyataan-media-muafakat-pluralisme-agama/>

Having presented the notional ramifications of *muhibah* and religious pluralism, we offer the findings of in-depth interviews with 14 religious leaders in Malaysia. We expect to measure their understanding of and acceptance on both terms, theoretically and practically. The findings can give some clues as to which of the two terms, is more viable to be used in the Malaysian context of coexistence.

***Muhibah* and Religious Pluralism as Understood and Experienced by Religious Leaders in Malaysia**

This report discloses some of the findings of in-depth interviews with 14 religious leaders in Malaysia. Fourteen religious leaders have been identified via purposive sampling method; four Buddhists, two Hindus, three Christians, four Sikhs and one Muslim. They were identified based on the important positions they held in their organisations. The responses were gathered using face to face, in-depth interview method and were recorded and transcribed. A pilot study was conducted before the actual interview. The interview questions were structured and bilingual (Malay and English). The leaders were given the freedom to choose the more convenient language to share their ideas. The interview questions were sent to the religious leaders beforehand to give them sufficient time to prepare their responses, thus better meeting the interview expectations. They were also required to sign a letter of consent that acknowledged their participation and the confidentiality of their identity.

The majority of the respondents perceived *muhibah* as a positive inter-relation between people of different races and religions, a state of mutual love and affection and living together. Six respondents asserted that *muhibah* was harmony. Two respondents related *muhibah* with their vernacular language, *mohabat* (love) in Punjabi for the Sikh and *ching-sai* (cordial) in Chinese language for the Buddhist. A Hindu and a Buddhist respondent denied that *muhibah* merely meant tolerance. Two of the respondents recalled *muhibah* experience they encountered at schools in yesteryears. Every respondent agreed that *muhibah* signified a positive inter-relation between people of different races and religions, a state of mutual love and affection and living together in harmony.

The majority of the respondents claimed they were familiar with *muhibah*. Seven of them learnt the term at school and three came across the term from the mainstream media. The majority had participated in *muhibah*-oriented programmes with four of them practically involved in inter-religious dialogue. Only two respondents acknowledged that they had never attended any special programme on *muhibah*. A Hindu respondent illustrated the spirit of fading *muhibah* as;

...When I was growing up...Deepavali time, my mother used to call all her colleagues. My mother was a nurse. Now retired. She speaks good Malay... She trains so many nurses in this country of all different races. All her colleagues are of different races. And then come Deepavali time and she'll invite all her friends... Aunty Tan, Aunty Zaiton, Aunty Tilages ... all together. So when they come to the house, I never see them as Malay, I never see them as Indian or anything like that. Never. We all eat together. That was in the late 70's and early 80's. After somewhere in the mid 80's, my mother has Deepavali, and suddenly, slowly, my mother's Muslims friends stopped coming to the house...So our country actually already had *muhibah* in the 60's. I remember, my father he can read Jawi, yeah. He was a Jawi champion in his school. Bahasa Malaysia debate in 1960's, Sekolah Melayu in Bayan Lepas Pulau Penang. He was the champion... So now we have to actually ask not how to foster *muhibah* in the future, go back in the past and see where the cracks appear in the first place...

All respondents accepted *muhibah* as a local concept. A Buddhist respondent was amazed with the unique idea of JKMPKA that related *muhibah* with *musyawarah*. Another Buddhist respondent said that *muhibah* was a colloquial lay person term while religious pluralism was only for the academics in the university. One Buddhist respondent thanked the founding fathers of Malaysia who managed to encapsulate “*kepercayaan kepada Tuhan*” in the Rukunegara which to him recognised the importance of religions in Malaysia. A Christian respondent acknowledged *muhibah* as a good framework for the Malaysian society while another ambiguously regarded it as political

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correctness. A Sikh respondent alleged that *muhibah* was natural and need not be taught.

Seven respondents acknowledged *muhibah* was a national policy while the rest of them seemed to be unsure. They held divided opinion on whether *muhibah* had been well adopted and implemented as a national agenda. A Buddhist respondent said that the adoption was very limited. Another Buddhist respondent perceived that *muhibah* was reflected in sports. The Sikh, Muslim and Hindu respondents said that the government had to do more in implementing *muhibah* and alleged that the government sincerity was not transparent. A Christian respondent did not agree that *muhibah* had taken place in the national agenda. He added that we could only have *muhibah* as political correctness. Another Christian respondent said even though he was aware of *muhibah* as a policy, he did not see very much of it.

There was no straightforward answer to the question whether *muhibah* had successfully transpired in the Malaysian agenda. Some of the respondents agreed but a Buddhist respondent stated that its understanding was still limited. Another Buddhist respondent said that *muhibah* has transpired in sports but not in other areas such as education, employment, economics and politics. A Hindu respondent, however was not satisfied that the term had transpired in the national agenda. She stated that “there is no consistency between what is practiced and what is taught...the mind is not really doing the same as what the mouth is doing and the body is doing”. It is assumed that she did not see sincerity in the government exhortations of *muhibah*. Another Hindu respondent admired the fact that *muhibah* had transpired during the leadership of the former Prime Ministers, Tun Hussein Onn and Tun Mahathir. He believed that 1Malaysia was indeed another facet of the *muhibah* agenda. A Christian respondent however, did not agree that *muhibah* had transpired in the national agenda. He put blame on the term *muhibah* (as well as 1Malaysia) which he thought suffered from lack of clarity.

The respondents were generally uncertain and critical on whether *muhibah* had helped to enhance inter-religious relations. A Buddhist respondent thought the implementation needed improvement. Another Buddhist respondent thought that *muhibah* remained a slogan and not practised. The third Buddhist

respondent said that *muhibah* reminded him of the good old days but presently had been spoiled. A Hindu respondent said that differences could be felt in the present days and another one said that *muhibah* was good if it was not politicised. A Christian respondent made quite an anti-climax confession when he stated "...the term does not save the world...In fact, terms are often the reason we fight!" Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents held positive hope for *muhibah* and believed that it had yet to be accomplished and therefore, more had to be done to realise the concept.

With regard to religious pluralism, it is very plain that almost every respondent regarded it as referring to diversity of religions. Two Christian respondents were aware of its technical meaning. On the other hand, two Sikh respondents had no clue at all about the term while another one held to the meaning that every religion is the same as it teaches the belief in God. The respondents held divided opinion about their familiarity with the philosophy. Some acknowledged that they knew it through formal education while some from readings. The Christians and the Sikhs thought that religious pluralism was found in their religious teachings while a Muslim respondent denied that he had any formal exposure on the philosophy. It is found that the majority of the respondents were referring to the literal meaning of religious pluralism and not to its technical and philosophical meaning.

The Buddhist respondents were pessimistic about the adoption of religious pluralism in Malaysia as they were unsure of the public acceptance. A Christian respondent believed that religious pluralism should be taken at its factual rather than technical meaning. The Muslim respondent said that the adoption of the philosophy depended on its interpretation. He, however, rejected the idea of equality of religions.

The majority of the respondents did not agree that religious pluralism had been translated in the national agenda. A Buddhist respondent, however, thought that religious pluralism was reflected in the Federal Constitution. Another Buddhist and a Hindu respondent said that religious pluralism had not been translated in the national agenda as there were restrictions to non-Muslims to form their own religious society at tertiary education. A Christian respondent said there was inconsistency as there had

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been a call for equality and yet there was also hegemony. The Muslim respondent viewed that the national agenda promoted unity and intergration rather than religious pluralism.

When confronted if religious pluralism will affect one's faith, it is found that the Buddhist and the Hindu respondents were the least offended for they took a liberal approach in accepting the philosophy. "There is no more boundary, all are the same." said a Buddhist respondent. A Christian respondent rejected what he regarded as factual pluralism while accepting its general meaning. Another Christian respondent believed that religious pluralism had effects on one's faith. He said that someone who believed in religious pluralism would have to change some of his beliefs. Another Christian respondent thought that religious pluralism was problematic to one's faith. A Muslim respondent on the other hand, believed that if religious pluralism meant diversity, it aspired for inter-religious engagement and would help to increase his faith in Islam.

The respondents were also asked about their acceptance to one of the teachings of religious pluralism that all religions are equal. Three Buddhist respondents indicated that they had no problem in accepting the idea. A Hindu respondent thought the idea of equality was a manipulation and it had been wrongly interpreted. A Christian respondent said that equality in dignity should not be translated into equality of truth. On the other hand, another Christian respondent rejected the idea and claimed that it was wrong. The other Christian respondent claimed that even if we did not accept the idea of equality, it did not mean we could not relate with people from other religions. Two Sikh respondents, however, were positive with the idea while a Muslim respondent denied that equality meant equality of the Ultimate.

When confronted with the idea that religious pluralism claims that all religions are equal it is found that all the Buddhist and Hindus respondents had no problem in accepting the idea. The Hindu respondent thought that the claim had been manipulated and wrongly interpreted. A Christian respondent affirmed that equality of dignity as taught in Christianity "should not be translated into equality of truth". Another Christian respondent, however, did not accept the idea and regarded it as mistaken, as he stated "I do not subscribe to this view. So I think

that it is mistaken.” A Sikh respondent claimed that “equal is relative term...equal in terms of all God’s creation but different in beliefs”. Another Sikh respondent accepted the idea of equality as positive. A Muslim respondent did not agree with the claim and he clarified his position “when I say equality, it does not refer to the equal goal or the ultimate.”

The respondents were also asked if they thought that the idea of religious pluralism brought harm to the Federal Constitution. Almost all of them denied this. A Buddhist respondent acknowledged the fact that it was the wisdom of the Malaysian forefathers who made Islam the religion of the Federation and it continued to be upheld by the constitution. Another Buddhist respondent believed that “every religion is equal but the status of Islam will never be questioned.” A Muslim respondent viewed that such an allegation had no basis since in reality, Muslims are put under the care of the Sultan and religious institutions that look after religious affairs.

The respondents were also asked if they were willing to organise *muhibah*-based programmes and invite other religious organisations, or to attend such a programme organised by other organisations. All of them were very confident that they were ready to commit to it. A Christian respondent, however, joked that he would look at the contents of the programme before joining. A Hindu respondent was very confident that she would be able to enlighten herself on the issue of inter-religious relation based on the principles she embraced. However, she was willing to make time to participate to be better educated about *muhibah*.

Discussion

Based on the responses, it is inferred that most of the respondents were well-acquainted with the term *muhibah* and some of them were already involved in *muhibah*-related programmes. Some of them acknowledged that *muhibah* is part of the teachings in their religion. Most of them were unaware of *muhibah* as a national policy for unity and integration instead they became familiar with it through other means such as education and propagation by the media. It is an interesting finding to note that none of them reiterated that *muhibah* was a remedial term for overcoming

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the racial crisis in 1969. In fact, a respondent was sarcastic of the credibility of any terms that could act as a solution to inter-religious problems in Malaysia. It is also learnt that every respondent valued the spirit of *muhibah* but there was a sense of despair on whether the term could continue to be realised the way it was in the past. Nevertheless, most of the respondents agreed that *muhibah* is an acceptable local concept to manage inter-religious relations in Malaysia.

It is found that all the respondents except for two Christian respondents were not conversant with the philosophy of religious pluralism. This led them to have uncertain ideas whether it could be adopted in Malaysia. They, however, accepted its literal meaning which is religious plurality and regarded it as the authentic meaning of religious pluralism. Most of the respondents did not have formal encounters with the term 'religious pluralism' even though some claimed that it was imbued in their religious teachings. Only the Christian respondents seemed to have clearer ideas about religious pluralism and they showed some rejections on its technical and philosophical meanings. Having resorted to its literal meaning, most of the respondents attempted to contextualise the philosophy. Therefore, there were questions that raised certain issues in religious pluralism which were deemed controversial, for example, the issue of equality of religions. This issue was purposely highlighted to examine the respondents' understanding of the philosophy as well as to educate them about the philosophy. Most of the respondents defended the philosophy. This is quite unjustifiable because based on their feedback, most of them had not had good input about the philosophy and that they had to resort to its superficial meaning which is religious plurality. Unfortunately, the superficial meaning does not explain religious pluralism objectively. As a result, the understanding they held is misleading.

In general, the findings suggest that the respondents were more familiar with *muhibah* compared to religious pluralism. However, the expectation that these religious leaders know better than their followers seems inaccurate. It is quite surprising to learn that many of them were not adequately and objectively informed about *muhibah* and religious pluralism. A majority of them agreed with *muhibah* but were also sarcastic about its

intended result. With exception to the Christian respondents, almost all of them were unfamiliar with religious pluralism. It is interesting to note that it was the Christian respondents who rejected religious pluralism and this was most likely because they had learned about the philosophy.

Conclusion

This paper attempts an objective comparison on the viability of *muhibah* and religious pluralism as a feasible concept for maintaining religious harmony in Malaysia. The former is a social philosophy deeply rooted in Malaysian history. The latter is a modern philosophy promoted as a global theology to deal with plural truth-claim in religions. Both terms are common in terms of its' dealing with pluralistic phenomenon.

Muhibah does not deal specifically with religious issues. In Malaysia, *muhibah* is better understood in its operationalised context. It secures the idea of harmony, unity and integration among the Malaysian pluralistic society. Religious pluralism, on the other hand, deals with theological issues pertaining to the question of the Ultimate. Since 2005, there has been academic research conducted on religious pluralism in Malaysian universities. However, the public at large were not exposed to the findings. The term was politically manipulated in 2010 and since then, it has become a public debate in Malaysia. Muslims were sceptical and resisted the philosophy. On the other hand, there is pressure from human rights supporters that the philosophy uphold religious tolerance and freedom of religion; the two allegedly lacking values in Malaysia.

From the interviews, it is found that most of the religious leaders were familiar with the two terms. However, it is also found that their understanding of *muhibah* was more profound than religious pluralism. With the exception of the Christian respondents, all the respondents subscribed to the literal meaning of religious pluralism. This is in fact, a distorted idea of the philosophy. The data also showed that the respondents were more confident with *muhibah* compared to religious pluralism. It is true that some of them embraced an abstraction of meanings and ideas about *muhibah* and most of them neglected its historical

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significance. However, the interview data substantiated the fact that *muhibah* is indeed engrained in the Malaysian history and better appreciated by the respondents. Religious pluralism in this regard may not fit the Malaysian context for two reasons (as postulated from the responses); religious pluralism is a philosophy and theological formulation foreign from the Malaysian experience. It is a complex concept that has a foundation in the rejection of Christian theology. Apart from problems of understanding, its complexities may add more complications to the pluralistic society of the Malaysian people. The interview data proved that only a few religious leaders were better informed of the philosophy. Most of them however, took the philosophy literally. When confronted with the question of equality of religions as imbued in the philosophy, there were divided answers and this gives the impression that the religious leaders themselves were not ready to deal with such theological complexities. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that even though religious pluralism seems not to be contextually fitting to the Malaysian setting, it does not mean that there is no room for tolerance and religious freedom. In fact, Malaysians should revisit its own formula which is *muhibah* and have the courage to learn from history.