



AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE BELIEFS AND  
PRACTICES OF MAHAYANA BUDDHISM: A CASE  
STUDY OF A CONTEMPORARY CHINESE  
MAHAYANA BUDDHIST COMMUNITY IN  
KUALA LUMPUR AND SELANGOR

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

As a country which is composed of plurality of religions, the dilemma of religious diversity cannot be avoided in Malaysia. People of different religions and races may have demonstrated a commendable ability to accommodate each other as co-operation and tolerance are often slogans in the context of national integration. Regrettably, misunderstanding, differences of opinion and prejudices have tarnished the national integration agenda among Malaysians. In this regard, maintaining the harmonious relationship within the multi-religious community of Malaysia is important for the stability and progress of the nation state. This study is undertaken to look into beliefs and practices of a contemporary Chinese Mahayana Buddhist community in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor with a view of finding ways of promoting inter-religious harmony in Malaysia, bearing in mind the crucial role and position of the Chinese community in the Malaysian politics and economy. This research aims to make a modest contribution to the inspiring vision of inter-religious harmony by highlighting the spiritual and ethical similarities between Islam and Mahayana Buddhism, notwithstanding the major doctrinal differences between the two religions. The similarities found between Islam and Mahayana Buddhism produce acknowledgement and respect of one another on both sides. The findings of this study show that Islam and Buddhism share a lot of similarities on various aspects related to values and practices, such as on their devotion to the essence of religion, the practice of morality which focuses specifically on the practice of precepts, and the practice of compassion in both religions. To conclude, it is important for the majority community i.e. Muslims, to realize the existence of some common values in the other religious communities in contemporary Malaysia. Therefore, the way the Buddhist community in Malaysia practises their religion needs to be studied objectively in order to find ways of promoting inter-religious harmony in Malaysia.

## ملخص البحث

من العضلات التي لا يمكن تجاهبها في بلد متعدد الأعراق والديانات كما ليزيا مسألة الاختلافات والتنوع بين أهل الديانات المختلفة. وذلك لأنهم يميلون عادة إلى الجنوح والتشدد والتطرف في معتقداتهم، ولكن في سياق تعدد المجتمع الماليزي فعلى أهل الديانات المختلفة إفساح تسامحهم وسماحتهم إلى حد ما تجاه الديانات الأخرى كشعار موحد في ضوء الوحدة الوطنية أو القومية. بالرغم من ذلك فإنه من المؤسف أن سوء التفاهم، وتباين وجهات النظر وعناصر التحيز لدى أهل الديانات المختلفة قد أفسدت عرى الوحدة الوطنية. لذلك فإن الحفاظ على العلاقات الوطيدة بين أوساط الديانات المتباينة مطلب أساسي من أجل الاستمرار والتقدم والرفاهية لأي دولة قومية. وتبنت هذه الدراسة النظر إلى المعتقدات والممارسات بين أوساط الصينيين المعاصرين في ديانتهم البوذية ماهايانا في كل من ولاية كوالالمفور وسلاڤجور، بغية تعزيز مسلك التآلف السلمي بين الديانات في بلادنا وترسيخه، ونظراً لمكانة المجتمع الصيني ودوره البارز في ساحة السياسة والاقتصاد في البلاد. فإن هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى إسهام ومواكبة مساعي الوطن في نشر وتعزيز رسالة التفاهم والتعايش السلمي بين أهل الديانات المختلفة في البلاد. وذلك من خلال الوقوف على عناصر التشابه والتوافق في مجالات القيم الأخلاقية والروحية بين دين الإسلام والديانة البوذية ماهايانا بالرغم من الاختلافات الكائن بين الديانتين وتباينها، وبالتالي باستطاعتهم التعايش سلماً واحترام بعضهم بعضاً. أسفرت نتائج الدراسة أن دين الإسلام والديانة البوذية ماهايانا متفقتان في كثير من المبادئ والمفاهيم العامة، وخاصة فيما يتعلق بالجانب القيمي والممارسة اليومية كالعبودية والخلقية وممارسة التعليم الديني والرحمة على الآخرين، ومن ثم على المجتمع الذي يمثل الأغلبية في البلاد (المسلمين) الوقوف على بعض المظاهر والقيم الدينية المشتركة الكامنة في أوساط الديانات الأخرى في المجتمع الماليزي المعاصر. وفي ضوء ذلك بات واضحاً - في هذه الدراسة - أن ممارسة المجتمع البوذي في ماليزيا لطقوس ديانتهم تتطلب دراسة وفحصاً علمياً دقيقاً مستهدفاً ذلك إلى إنارة الطريق لترويج المساعي الوطنية في قضية التحاور والتآلف السلمي بين الأديان وترسيخها في البلاد.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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with Mr. Chum Let Onn

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## LIST OF TRANSLITERATION

Arabic Term	Transliteration	Arabic Term	Transliteration	Arabic term	Transliteration
ء	‘	ر	r	ف	F
ب	B	ز	z	ق	Q
ت	T	س	s	ك	K
ث	Th	ص	ṣ	ل	L
ج	J	ض	ḍ	م	M
ح	ḥ	ط	ṭ	ن	n
خ	Kh	ظ	ẓ	ه	h
د	D	ع		و	w
ذ	Dh	غ	gh	ي	y
ـَ	A	ـِ	i	ـُ	u
ـِـَ	Ā	ـِـِ	ī	ـِـُ	ū

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia as a modern nation-state is unique because of the pluralistic nature of its society, which comprises people of diverse races, ethnic groups, cultural, linguistic, and religious background. Its population consists of followers of the world major religions including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Ethnicity and religion are the central elements of social identities in Malaysia. The` meaningfulness of the relationships is determined by *kaum* or *bangsa* (race, ethnicity), of which Malay, Chinese, and Indian are the main official categories. Religion is a key aspect of ethnic identity and communal solidarity in Malaysia. The Malaysian Constitution defines “Malay” as one “who professes the religion of Islam.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, individuals of Malay ethnicity are automatically identified as Muslim, regardless whether they are practicing Muslims or not. On the other hand, ethnic Chinese are largely Buddhist although large numbers are Christians, Muslims and followers of traditional Chinese religions. Likewise, ethnic Indians are mostly Hindu, although there are significant numbers of Indian Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs.<sup>2</sup> According to the 1957 Constitution of Independence or *Merdeka*, “Islam is the religion of the Federation”<sup>3</sup> and all the Sultans are the Heads of their states as well as the Heads of the Islamic religion of the Malaysian Federation. Islam is granted privileges over the other religions and the Malays are also granted special right in the social, political and

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<sup>1</sup> Legal Research Board, *Federal Constitution*, Article 160(2) (Kuala Lumpur: International Law Book Services, 2001), at 25.

<sup>2</sup> Susan E. Ackerman and Raymond L.M. Lee, *Sacred Tensions: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Legal Research Board, *Federal Constitution*, Article 3(1), at 2.

economic sphere. Though Islam is the religion of Malaysia, the Constitution guarantees all citizens the freedom to profess and practice his or her own faith, as well as the right to propagate their faith.<sup>4</sup>

The statistics of 2010 from the Department of Statistics Malaysia<sup>5</sup> shows that Buddhists are the second largest population in Malaysia.<sup>6</sup> Buddhism is among the oldest religions in Southeast Asia introduced by trade and conquest. History recorded that Buddhism came to the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago around 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>7</sup> Of the three major traditions in Buddhism namely Theravada or Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, the Theravada tradition spread from India to Southeast Asia with a significant presence today in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. The Mahayana tradition spread from India to central and eastern Asia and is dominant today in China, North and South Korea, Mongolia, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Singapore. The Vajrayana tradition is developed out of Mahayana and is found in Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, and Mongolia.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, Vijay Samarawickrama mentioned that “there is evidence that Mahayana Buddhism had begun to spread in Malaysia by 5<sup>th</sup> century CE and flourished until the 8<sup>th</sup> century. During this period much of the region was under the control of the *Srivijaya* kingdom, the first great Indonesian kingdom which controlled the Strait of Melaka, the port kingdoms of both the Malay Peninsula and much of

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<sup>4</sup> Legal Research Board, *Federal Constitution*, Article 11(1).

<sup>5</sup> Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010 <[http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1215%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristic-report-population-and-housing-census-malaysia-2010-updated-2972011&catid=130%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristic-report-population-and-housing-census-malaysia-2010&Itemid=154&lang=en](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1215%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristic-report-population-and-housing-census-malaysia-2010-updated-2972011&catid=130%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristic-report-population-and-housing-census-malaysia-2010&Itemid=154&lang=en)> (Retrieved 21 December 2011).

<sup>6</sup> The population of Malaysia in 2010 is 28.3 million, (Bumiputera is 66.7%, Chinese is 24.6%, Indian is 7.4%, and others 1.3%) and (Islam is 61.3%, Buddhism is 19.8%, Christianity is 9.2%, Hinduism is 6.3%).

<sup>7</sup> M. Kamal Hassan and Ghazali Basri (eds.), “Chronology,” *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Religions and Beliefs*, (Singapore: Archipelago Press, vol.10, 2005), 8.

<sup>8</sup> C. Amore, R. and Ching, J., “The Buddhist Tradition,” in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, edited by G. Oxtoby, W. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 215-216.