



RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN CONTEMPORARY
MALAYSIA: MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN
PERSPECTIVES

BY

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ABSTRACT

Religious diversity in Malaysia has led to the development of what social scientists refer to as “religious pluralism.” Comprising of major religions of the world such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Sikhism and “others,” it has recently become a challenge for Malaysia to manage religious diversity and maintain social harmony. Different interpretations of religious pluralism among scholars have resulted in misunderstanding of the concept, particularly among members of Muslim and Christian communities in the country. The discourse of “religious pluralism” started when some prominent Muslim scholars warned that Muslims in Malaysia are threatened by liberalism and religious pluralism, which can impinge into the faith of Muslims. The findings assert that different interpretations of religious pluralism among scholars have resulted in misunderstanding of the concept, particularly among members of Muslim and Christian communities in the country. The reactions from both Muslims and Christians have been coloured with religio-political voices. The main objective of this dissertation is to examine the current debate on religious pluralism in contemporary Malaysia. In doing so, the dissertation has conducted in-depth interviews with ten religious Christian and Muslim figures. It aims to present various academic interpretations of the term “religious pluralism” by leading Christian and Muslim figures to explore the contemporary religious experience in Malaysia. Questions have been asked to both religious groups in order to investigate their opinions and responses of the discourse of religious pluralism in Malaysia. The findings of the dissertation indicate that both terminologies of “religious pluralism” and “religious plurality” have been used interchangeably to connote the pluralistic identity of Malaysia. However, the term “religious pluralism” has been clearly identified with Hick and pluralist scholars and thus philosophically contested. Through the narratives of religious representatives it is found that religion contributes significantly to the development of Malaysian pluralistic society. The study also proposes a number of recommendations on how these religious groups can help nurture the essential values of unity (*wuḥdah*) in living with diversity.

ملخص البحث

أدى تعدد الأديان في ماليزيا إلى مرحلة سماها خبراء الاجتماع "بالتعددية الدينية". تتألف من عدة ديانات رئيسية في العالم أمثال الإسلام، والمسيحية، والبوذية، والهندوسية، والطاوية، والسيخية وغيرها، أصبحت هذه القضية تحديًا جديدًا لدولة ماليزيا في إدارتها لتعدد الأديان وتحقيق الانسجام الاجتماعي فيها. إنَّ الحديث عن التعددية الدينية قد بدأ بعد أن حذّر أحد العلماء البارزين بأن المسلمين في ماليزيا يتعرضون حاليًا لتهديدات الليبرالية، والتعددية الدينية التي قد تلوث عقيدتهم. تؤكد نتيجة البحث أن اختلاف تفسيرات بين الخبراء لمفهوم التعددية الدينية، قد أنتج سوء تفاهم حول هذا المفهوم، ولا سيما بين المسلمين والمسيحيين في هذه البلاد. وأما ردود المسلمين والمسيحيين؛ فإنها ممتزجة بألوان السياسة الدينية. الهدف الرئيس من البحث هو دراسة المناقشة الحالية حول التعددية الدينية ذات العلاقة بماليزيا المعاصرة. وتحقيقًا لهذا الهدف فقد أجريت المقابلة المتعمقة مع عشرة شخصيات من علماء الدين ممثلي الدين الإسلامي والمسيحي. وهدف المقابلة عرض التفسيرات الأكاديمية المتنوعة لمفهوم التعددية الدينية في منظور علماء الدين من المسلمين والمسيحيين للكشف عن الخبرات الدينية المعاصرة في ماليزيا. هناك مجموعة من الأسئلة المصممة قد وُجّهت إلى كلا المجموعتين لفحص آراءهم وردودهم حول الحوار عن التعددية الدينية في ماليزيا. وأوضحت نتيجة البحث أن كلا المصطلحين "التعددية الدينية"، و"تعدد الأديان" قد استخدما تبادليًا في بيان فكرة التعددية لماليزيا. ومع ذلك، فإن مصطلح التعددية الدينية قد ارتبط ارتباطًا شديدًا برأي جون هيك، ومؤيدي تيار التعددية، ولذا؛ فإنه نوقش فلسفيًا عند الحديث عنه. وعبر توضيحات ممثلي الدين خلال المقابلات، لقد أثبت الفحص أن الدين أصبح عاملاً رئيسًا في نشوء التعددية الاجتماعية في ماليزيا. لقد قدّم البحث بعض الاقتراحات فيما يتعلق بدور هذين الدينين لإنماء قيم الوحدة في بيئة تعددت فيها الأديان.

ABSTRACT IN MALAY

Kepelbagaian agama di Malaysia telah membawa kepada suatu perkembangan yang dinamakan oleh pakar-pakar sosial sebagai “pluralisme agama”. Terdiri daripada beberapa agama utama dunia seperti Islam, Kristian, Budhha, Hindu, Agama Cina, Taoisme, Sikh dan lain-lain, isu ini telah menjadi suatu cabaran baru bagi negara Malaysia untuk menguruskan kepelbagaian agama dan bagi mengekalkan keharmonian masyarakat. Wacana tentang pluralisme agama bermula apabila salah seorang tokoh ulama terkemuka memberi peringatan bahawa umat Islam di Malaysia kini mula diancam oleh fahaman liberal dan pluralisme agama yang boleh menggugat akidah umat Islam. Hasil penemuan kajian menegaskan bahawa perbezaan tafsiran mengenai pluralisme agama di kalangan pakar-pakar telah mengakibatkan berlakunya salah faham terhadap konsep ini terutamanya di kalangan penganut Islam dan Kristian dalam negara ini. Reaksi daripada penganut Islam dan Kristian telah diwarnai dengan suara-suara politik keagamaan. Objektif utama disertasi ini adalah untuk menilai perdebatan terkini tentang pluralisme agama dalam konteks Malaysia. Bagi mencapai objektif ini, temubual secara mendalam telah diadakan bersama sepuluh orang tokoh agama yang mewakili agama Kristian dan agama Islam. Temubual bertujuan untuk mengenenahkan kepelbagaian tafsiran akademik tentang istilah pluralisme agama yang diberikan oleh tokoh-tokoh terkemuka dalam agama Islam dan Kristian untuk meneroka pengalaman beragama di Malaysia pada masakini. Satu set soalan berstruktur telah diajukan kepada kedua-dua kumpulan agama bagi mendapatkan pandangan dan maklum balas mereka terhadap wacana pluralisme agama di Malaysia. Hasil penemuan disertasi ini menjelaskan bahawa kedua-dua terminologi iaitu “pluralisme agama” dan “kepelbagaian agama” telah digunakan secara bersilih ganti dalam memberikan makna tentang idea kemajmukan agama di Malaysia. Walaubagaimanapun, istilah pluralisme agama ini sebenarnya telah dikaitkan secara jelas dengan pandangan John Hick dan pendokong-pendokong aliran pluralisme, justeru ia telah diperdebatkan secara falsafah dalam wacana ini. Berdasarkan huraian daripada wakil-wakil agama ini, dapatlah dirumuskan bahawa agama menjadi faktor utama dalam pembentukan kepelbagaian masyarakat di Malaysia. Kajian ini turut memberikan beberapa cadangan tentang bagaimana kumpulan agama ini boleh membantu dalam memupuk semangat perpaduan dalam suasana kepelbagaian agama.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, 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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CHAPTER ONE

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA: MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“Religious plurality” and “religious pluralism”¹ constitute two different terms that are used interchangeably by many Muslim and Christian scholars. The term “plurality of religions” commonly refers to the existence of various religious denominations in a society which has no pervasive impact at all since all organized religions in general acknowledge the existence of other organized religions. The term “religious pluralism” was coined by Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), a liberal Christian theologian who established the idea that “all religions, including Christianity, always contain an element of truth, and none has the absolute truth, and the concept of God in this world is plural and not singular”.² However, there exists the tendency to equate the meaning of “religious pluralism” with “plurality of religions” which significantly differs from the theological and philosophical contexts. Peter Byrne in his *Prolegomena of Religious Pluralism* clearly affirms the difference between them when he puts forth that;

¹ The term “religious pluralism” was introduced in the 20th century to encounter religious intolerance, particularly the inclusive view of Christianity. It was then spread by a group of scholars who attempted to bring forth the Perennial Philosophy in the 1940s such as Rene Guenon (1886-1951) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) later established by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) in his *De L'unité Transcendante Des Religions (Transcendent Unity of Religions)* which was first published in France in 1948. John Hick promoted this idea in his writings such as in his *God has Many Names* (1980) and *Disputed Questions of Religious Truth* (1993). A similar view was shared by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) in his *Questions of Religious Truth* (1967) and *Towards a World Theology* (1981). Both Hick and Smith were known to be more liberal and secular in their views compared to Guenon and Schuon. Among the Muslim scholars adhering to this ideology are to be mentioned Sayyid Hossien Nasr and Nurcholish Majid, Nasr being the one more inclined to the Perennial Philosophy and the traditional method and Majid the reformist whose ideas influenced the Liberal Islam Networking (JIL) in Indonesia.

² Ernst Troeltsch, “The Place of Christianity among the World Religions in *Christianity and Other Religions*, edited by John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), 11-31.

Pluralism is one intellectual response to that fact of religious diversity. The starting point in discussion of pluralism is then the fact that there are many religious traditions in human history and they exhibit diversity. Many facets of this diversity are not primary interest to pluralism. As a thesis in the philosophy of religion, pluralism's first focus is on the fact that religions implicitly or explicitly claim cognitive success and achievements of various kinds. Thus they claim to have a true account of the nature of transcendent, sacred reality, or human nature, or of how human salvation and liberation from evil is to be achieved.³

Byrne further laid down five important characteristics that constitute the meaning of "religious pluralism" and discussed in depth his arguments.⁴ Likewise, Meltzer in his *Three Faiths One God* commented on three different types of attitudes towards religious pluralism, the combative, over-simplifying and compromising attitude which also concurs that both terms are not identical.⁵ These three attitudes towards religious pluralism have very much influenced the way scholars and theologians in the West interpret the notion of religious truth claims, particularly vis-à-vis the 'anonymous Christians'. This largely characterized the way in which modern

³ Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995), p.1.

⁴ There are five characteristics of "religious pluralism": 1. It is a response that eradicates the sense of uniqueness and absoluteness of any particular religion. 2. It affirms the truth shared by all religions of the world. 3. It focuses on the aspect of salvation, affirming that all religions contain the element of salvation. 4. It concentrates on religious experience asserting that all religions are equally valid to encounter the transcendent reality. Thus, he argues that religious pluralism promotes a kind of equal footing pertaining to the above-mentioned aspects between all major religious traditions of the world.

⁵ In regard to the idea of a religious Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue Meltzer replied to certain statements made by Dr Maher M. Hathout, Chairman of the Islamic Center of Southern California on the fact that there were at least three different attitudes discernible. The first attitude he called "the combative attitude" referring to someone feeling that what he believed was right and what others believed was wrong. According to Hathout, such an attitude would not bear any fruitful outcome as his only intent was to prove others wrong. The second attitude he called the "oversimplifying attitude" of someone claiming that all religions were the same and therefore their differences immaterial. This particular attitude was potentially troublesome as every religion held its own unique beliefs with different takes on fundamental issues. The third attitude he called the "the compromising attitude" that advocated certain reforms of all religions in order to suit the norms and values of modern Western society. According to Meltzer these three attitudes needed to be eliminated since they would never allow for a constructive religious dialogue. He argued, "It is now the responsibility of those who believe in Him to show that they, while taking the different paths to Him can acknowledge each other and have a straightforward, honest, informing and fruitful dialogue." See further John Hick and Edmund S. Meltzer, *Three Faiths One God A Jewish, Christian, Muslim Encounter* (New York: Press Albany, 1989), pp.2-5.

Christians perceived other world religions.⁶ The debates over the term among scholars have led some to a conclusion that religious pluralism is a contested term and that it requires a thoughtful clarification.

This form of scholarly discourse has influenced other countries such as Indonesia⁷ and Malaysia which are predominantly Muslim. In Malaysia, the different interpretations of religious pluralism have given rise to disputes among the various theological schools particularly among Muslims.⁸ For example, tensions rise when prominent politicians such as Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim are being perceived as promoting religious pluralism aka John Hick which resulted in loud cries of criticism from the more traditional Muslim quarters. The discussion of the notion of religious pluralism among Muslims began in 2010 when a prominent scholar persistently warned his fellow Malaysian Muslims of the threat of religious pluralism and liberalism.⁹ However, this issue had been raised earlier.¹⁰ The present Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak has also been accused of endorsing prejudices by some of his critics. In response, he issued a clear statement in front of the imams and the mosque committee members

⁶ These different views of looking at religion have also resulted in the birth of civil religion in the modern American society. Civil religion is “a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people.” See Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (1967), p.8.

⁷ The term is synonymous with religious diversity. The pluralist-inclusive group argues that it is the reality of religious diversity which leads to a harmonious co-existence. It stresses the positive side of living together in a diverse society. See Buddhi Munawwar Rachman, *Islam dan Pluralisme Nurcholish Majid* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2007) See also Khalif Muammar A. Harris, “Pluralisme dan Kesatuan Agama: Tanggapan Kritis”, in *Atas Nama Kebenaran: Tanggapan Kritis Terhadap Wacana Islam Liberal*, 2nd. Edition Kajang: Akademi Kajian Ketamadunan, 2006).

⁸ Lee and Ackerman both share their belief that in Malaysia religious pluralism is frequently challenged and in danger of breaking down. See further Raymond L.M Lee and Susan E. Ackerman, *Sacred Tensions Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

⁹ The Muslim scholar Harussani pointed at the threat liberalism and religious pluralism posed to Malay Muslims in Malaysia. (*Utusan Malaysia*, December, 17, 2010)

¹⁰ Chandra Muzaffar referred to the definition given in the Oxford Dictionary and suggested a wider meaning of the term in the sense of the co-existence of many religions, faiths, etc within the same polity. (*Star*, June 18, 2006).

on July 19, 2012 that “pluralism, liberalism – all these ‘isms’ are against Islam and it is compulsory for us to fight these.”¹¹

On the other hand, a few noticeable figures have been challenging the strict resentment over the use of the term. Scholars such as Chandra Muzaffar, Osman Bakar and Muhammad Hashim Kamali shared similar views pertaining to the correct understanding of the term and insisted that the term “religious pluralism” should be introduced in Malaysia from a different perspective and with different connotations. This has marked a challenging scenario in Malaysia where a significant number of religious representatives mainly from Islam and Christianity insist on a very narrow definition of the term. The majority of Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims¹² categorically reject religious pluralism as being too closely linked to Western secularism, liberalism and modernism.¹³ The definition given by its famous proponent John Hick has been preferred in many discourses.¹⁴ Due to the theological and religious inconsistencies of the term, a considerable number of Muslims, among them muftis and

¹¹ *Utusan Malaysia*, July 20, 2012.

¹² It is noted that the term has been condemned unlawful by the Fatwa Council of Indonesia which condemned the dissemination of this ideology in the country.

¹³ One scholar, for instance, discussed the negative impact of Western globalization on the Muslim society in general that confronted them with the idea of pluralism. She argued that “The process of globalization promises (or from another perspective, threatens) to spread pluralism throughout the world. Since globalization is spearheaded largely by the West and is associated with modernization, not everyone is necessarily ready for it or comfortable with it. But the process we may say, is well-nigh irreversible – and it is this new, pluralist world with seemingly no frontiers that all people, including Muslims, have to come to terms with.” See Asma Afsaruddin, “Absolutism vs. Pluralism in Islam Today”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 6, (4), 2008; 23.

¹⁴ According to Hick, ‘this is a theory that the great world religions constitute variant conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the one ultimate, mysterious divine reality.’ (1987, p.36) And the definition continues ‘...the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate, and that within each of them independently the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality centeredness is taking place.’ (1987, pp.36-7) Hence, the meaning constitutes various conceptions of religious groups and individuals to the meaning, concept, and idea of God, the Real i.e. the ultimate reality or divine being. Also, it has switched the position of a particular religion (i.e. Christianity) from self-centeredness (i.e. Jesus) to reality centeredness (i.e. the existence of divine reality or realities) in which it brings forward the most significant value of a religion (i.e. the concept of salvation) which cannot be solely obtained from Christianity but can also be gained from other religions as well.

distinguished scholars,¹⁵ along with important sects in Christianity, inevitably have their problems with this term.

The discourse of religious pluralism has urged some Muslims to look forward for a more tolerable view in relation to diversity and harmonious living together. A similar trend is noticeable all over the Muslim world that different connotations of religious pluralism and the strict usage of it in Malaysia constitutes one of the many challenges of religiously diverse societies.¹⁶ Therefore, many Muslim representatives have started to encourage the building of an atmosphere of a more distinctively “inclusive, rational and contemporary approach”. Yet, such a proposed approach seems to be full of uncertainties and confusion, added to the fact that the majority of Malay Muslim scholars continue to propagate the notion that religious pluralism is detrimental to the *tawhīdic* nature of Islam.¹⁷

Likewise, Harussani’s interpretation of religious pluralism has been multifariously shared by many Christians in Malaysia who have found it very hard to understand the prohibition of this idea in Malaysia. They, too, have presented their own interpretations and perspectives pertaining to Harussani’s verdict. Thomas Lee Seng Hock puts forth the definition from the Oxford Dictionary in which it defines pluralism

¹⁵ Another distinguished scholar who is noted to have written many articles including *The Religious Philosophy of John Hick: A Critical Review* from the main theological discourse of *Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah* to Malay Muslims is our dearest late Ustaz Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady. This is also among his important endeavour in facing the threats of religious pluralism in the Malaysian society. Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady, *Falsafah Agama John Hick: Pengamatan Dari Perspektif Ajaran Ahli Sunnah Wal-Jamaah* (Kuala Lumpur: Muafakat, 2012).

¹⁶ Christopher Rodney Yeoh, “Malaysia, Truly Asia? Religious Pluralism in Malaysia,” *Pluralism Project Harvard University*, 2006, <<http://pluralism.org/reports/view/30>>, (Retrieved Feb 12, 2013).

¹⁷ He is of the opinion that religious pluralism shares the same nature as it refers to the co-existence of different religions within the same polity. He also eloquently defended the wisdom of Islam which encourages the spirit of religious diversity described in many Qur’anic verses. He even mentioned that it was the inclusive and accommodative attitudes of the medieval scholars that allowed for the prosperous and tolerant Muslim civilization. This was further proved by the attempts made by Muslim scholars to know and learn about other religions for the purpose of rational enquiry rather than blind polemics and their refusal to close the door of *ijtihad* in Islamic thought.

as “a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles co-exist.”¹⁸ Hock appears to understand the exclusive standpoint of Islam and Christianity which according to him possess a similarity. Hock argued that from a theological standpoint it was valid and consistent to denounce the term, yet from the other perspective of a multi-racial society and peaceful co-existence among religions, it was, however, inappropriate. Some Christian representatives answered quite positively to the attempts of their Muslim counterparts to allow for a wider interpretation and understanding of the term. In contrast, quite a number of Christians shared a similar view with the authorities in Malaysia and the Fatwa Office, that the proclamation of Hick’s religious pluralism should not be introduced in Malaysia.

On several occasions, certain religious representatives attempt to equal the term with multi-culturalism or the co-existence of religions in the sense of religious diversity. This, however, contradicts itself since what was mentioned by Harussani, the Mufti of Perak, was not directed to the meaning of diversity or having different belief systems. Harussani asserted that Muslims should be prudently cautious of the threats of religious pluralism and liberalism, particularly in those instances when they impinge on the *tawhidic* nature of Islam. The reactions to his statement have so far been mixed, yet more pronounced in Muslim and Christian circles. Malay Muslims of which the majority are Sunnis and of the Shafi’ite school are divided into traditionalists and modernists. Meanwhile, the majority of Malaysian Christians can be identified as members of the Orthodox Catholic Church, the Evangelicals and the liberal modernists. They are represented by the Orthodox Catholic Church, the National Evangelical

¹⁸ (*The Malaysian Insider*, Dec, 17, 2010).<
<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/breakingviews/article/the-debate-on-pluralism-thomas-lee-seng-hock/>> (accessed 10th January 2013).

Christian Fellowship (NECF), the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), the Presbyterian Church, and KAIROS Research Center.

This study is aimed at shedding some light on the views of the existing religious groups among Christians and Muslims debating and sharing their main arguments for or against the term “religious pluralism”. It examines the ongoing debates of scholars over certain theological issues in Malaysia. The study also addresses the possible consequences of different interpretations of this term, particularly those that may cause disunity, disrespect and, more dangerously, religious bigotry in the future of Christianity and Islam as practiced in Malaysia. This aspect of research is deemed a meaningful and constructive contribution in the context of nation-building since it is hoped that it will initiate further efforts to develop and propagate a genuine understanding of the term “religious pluralism” in the light of comparative study. Despite the fact that religious pluralism is commonly understood in a different manner, the research attempts to present the main views of Christian and Muslim representatives, to assess and evaluate the discussions of learned scholars and representatives of these organizations on the issue and to research the impact of this plurality of understanding to the current situation of the Christians and Muslims in Malaysia. It is also hoped that the research will help to raise awareness in both religious groups on how this issue or any ideological stand has the power to affect the national unity of the country. The Malaysian Muslims will benefit from a more profound understanding of the Islamic concept of *wasatiyyah* (moderation) in dealing with major religious issues in the country and thus help curbing extremism or religious fundamentalism that can only have a perilous impact in the future.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Understanding religious pluralism has been very contentious, among the scholars in the West as much as among the scholars in Malaysia. Here, the controversy flared up several decades ago. It started when a number of Muslim scholars vehemently debated over the meanings and perspectives of religious pluralism. Harussani, a renowned Muslim scholar and religious official, claimed that the ideas of liberalism and religious pluralism threatened the future of the Malay Muslims in Malaysia. The heated response from various religious groups, particularly from the Muslims and Christians called for a proper definition and discussion of the term “religious pluralism” and the concept it represents in a particular social-political context, together with looking into the wider impact it has on Malaysia as a multi-religious society. Muslims were also divided in perceiving the meaning and scope of this term. The concerns of the Malaysian Christians were raised as any possible restrictions of religious pluralism could lead to restrictions upon their religious affairs. As such, the wider public has the right to be duly educated on this term. Loose interpretations of the term ranging somewhere between “plurality of religions” and “religious pluralism” would in the end only cause further confusion and confrontation. This research is aimed at analyzing and evaluating the different interpretations of “religious pluralism” as viewed by the leading local Christian and Muslim organizations and determine the negative and positive impact it exerts on both religious communities in Malaysia.

1.3 RATIONALE

Recent studies have highlighted that the philosophical works on modern religion in the West have contributed largely to the development of religious pluralism.¹⁹ The notion of religious pluralism has remained contestable even though Western scholars have meticulously debated on its scope and definition. They have worked on the definition of this term from a general connotation of “plural” to the meaning which has philosophical and religious orientations. This includes verifying the relation between religious pluralism and the development of Christian theology. It explicates from the exclusive truth claim towards celebrating the non-Christians in its inclusive dimension and later towards the pluralistic stance of religious truth claim. The study of Christianity in relation to non-Christians became a major concern to some prominent scholars such as John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Gavin De Costa. In fact, some of their more radical approaches were condemned as “crossing the theological Rubicon” and deemed as outright heretical.²⁰ The discourse of religious pluralism in the West inevitably resulted in the emergence of several fractions of the pluralists, the inclusivists and the exclusivists.

This development is to be considered as important as it explains how religious pluralism is debated in the West. In modern Malaysia, a significant trend has appeared whereby the debate is staged by the Muslim and the Christian factions who present their opinions in multifarious ways. Some religious representatives have shown their concern on the issue of religious pluralism, most notably among them the Christian groups as they constitute the most influential minority group in the country. It cannot be denied

¹⁹ Haslina Ibrahim, “From Religious Plurality to Religious Pluralism: Historical Development” [Dari Kepelbagaian Agama Kepada Pluralisme Agama], in *Religious Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective [Pluralisme Agama: Satu Penelitian Islami]*, edited by Mohd Farid Shahrin (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit IKIM, 2014).

²⁰ Edmund Chia, “The Pluralist Model: An Asian Appraisal,” *New Theology Review*, August (2006): 55.

that the reactions of certain leading religious representatives have created a religio-political divide as different groups share different stance and opinions in terms of their political and religious position. The study is important to highlight the dominant views of religious leaders and academics on the issue of religious pluralism in Malaysia. It aims at highlighting their main arguments, especially those that relate to their belief as Christians and Muslims. Their views will be examined thoroughly, specifically in terms of their understanding of the idea in a country that has variety of beliefs, races and cultures. This is deemed as important as it will be helpful for evaluating Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia, especially since the predominantly Chinese Christians may feel threatened in their status as a religious minority and outnumbered by the predominantly Malay Muslims. Besides that, the study will attempt to examine the understanding of the term “religious pluralism” which includes its multiple themes, notions and characteristics. This will also lead to the analysis of the implications of these various interpretations by different religious groups and its consequences for Malaysia as a nation which is built on religious, racial and cultural diversity.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How the study of religion in the West has shaped the development of religious pluralism in the West?
2. When and how the discourse of religious pluralism developed and impacted the Muslim countries.
3. How does the Malaysian society currently understand the term ‘religious pluralism’ and ‘religious plurality’?