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The Muslims' Response to the Challenges of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia

Najiah Athirah Jamaludin*
Haslina Ibrahim**

Abstract

This paper discusses the rise of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia in the light of Muslims' response perspective. The researcher seeks to explore the narrative of religious pluralism in Malaysia and to explain both the meaning and the historical background to objectively analyse their challenges to Muslim faith in Malaysia and thus explain the Muslims' response to it. This research is theoretical and philosophical, and therefore, is qualitative in nature and depends much on textual research. The resources include printed and online materials. To analyse the data, the researcher has adopted critical and analytical methods. The findings show that acceptance of religious pluralism by Muslims is the result of confusion and misinterpretation of texts on the origin, context and the challenges brought by the philosophy to religion, in particular to Islam, being the religion of the nation.

Keywords: Pluralism, religious pluralism, Malaysia.

Introduction

Religious pluralism is a philosophy coined by John Hick (1922-2012), a former Theology Professor at Claremont Graduate School California USA and Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham who defined it as; "the view that the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious tradition. There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation."¹

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¹ John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1985), p. 40.

This means that religious pluralism considers that all major world religions can lead one salvifically to God.¹ In other words, religious pluralism considers that all religions lead to one central point, which is the *Real an Sich*, and that it incarnates in many ways and forms in a relative manner.

The other definition of religious pluralism offered by Diana L. Eck² stated that pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of differences. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, and the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. Eck maintained that in the world we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.³

In the context of this research, we focus on the definition of religious pluralism as developed by John Hick which advocated the original intended meaning of religious pluralism as a philosophy. As a matter of fact, John Hick's religious pluralism carries the most complex and controversial meaning and the most related to religious liberalism.

Religious pluralism emerged in Malaysia in the late 20th century. Hence, it is still new and not yet known to many of the Malaysian community. Nonetheless, this does not mean that its followers or also called the pluralists did not exist in Malaysia. In fact, they have been consistently advocating and promoting the ideas of religious pluralism in the mind of people in the name of religious tolerance. Therefore, it is essential to examine the case of Malaysian pluralists who in general understood that religious pluralism leads to religious tolerance. Therefore, the original meaning of religious pluralism should be accentuated the way it has been promoted by John Hick. It deserves to be presented.

¹ John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 18. Hick writes, "I suggest that this is the central concern of all the great world religions. They are not primarily philosophies or theologies but primarily ways of salvation/liberation. And it is clear that salvation, in this sense of an actual change in human beings from natural self-centredness towards a recentring in the Divine, the Ultimate, the Real, is a long process.... and that this process is taking place not only within Christianity but also, and so far as we can tell to a more or less equal extent, within the other great traditions."

² Diana L. Eck is a Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies and the Director of the Pluralism Project.

³ Diana L. Eck, "What Is Pluralism?," *The Pluralism Project at Harvard University*, 2006, <http://pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism/>.

The Meaning of Religious Pluralism

The definition of religious pluralism varies among Christian theologians, philosophers or even pluralists themselves. In general, there are two definitions to religious pluralism. The first definition which many subscribe to is religious plurality. The other definition which is no less controversial is the philosophy that regards all religions as the same manifestation of a single Truth.

Religious pluralism is a debatable term both in terms of its etymology as well as in its terminology. The term is usually misunderstood as a result of its unclear and blurred meaning.¹ According to Thoha, this term is derived etymologically from two words, namely 'pluralism' and 'religion', literally translated in Arabic as '*al-ta'addudiyyah al-dīniyyah*'.²

Thomas Banchoff referred religious pluralism to the interaction among religious groups in society and politics. Religion is understood broadly to include not only individual and shared beliefs but also social practices and institutions that bind groups. Pluralism denotes group interaction in civil society and state institutions. Within the American background, the term religious pluralism describes the social and political phenomenon and does not imply a variety of ways to one truth or the superiority of the American polity over other forms of social and political organization.³ It shows that Banchoff understood religious pluralism as relations among religious groups in society and does not imply a variety of ways to one truth. It appears that he showed a definition of religious pluralism in a different perspective which is religious pluralism from the political sphere in the American context.

Still in the American context, Peter L. Berger wrote in his essay; the relation between pluralism and religion has never been definite.⁴ Berger understood religious pluralism in a political manner. He related pluralism with democracy and how the religious people accept democracy even though it is not allowable religiously.

The Dictionary of Christianity in America defines religious pluralism as both to the wide diversity of religious group in America and

¹ Anis Malik Thoha, *Tren Pluralisme Agama : Tinjauan Kritis* (Jakarta: Perspektif, 2005), p. 11.

² Ibid.

³ Thomas Banchoff, ed., *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁴ Peter L. Berger, "Pluralism, Protestantization, and the Voluntary Principle," in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 19.

to the polity which grants them equal liberty. The philosophical version contends that reality is ultimately made up of multiple substances, or that no single system of explanation or view of reality will suffice to explain all that exists. Such pluralism rules out monotheism. Religious pluralism is practically compatible with both philosophical pluralism and monism.¹ In this sense, the definition here refers religious pluralism to the diversity of religions and organizations that give these religions equal liberty. While philosophically, it explains on the diverse systems of belief in understanding the Reality.

Diana L. Eck wrote in her essay about diversity and pluralism. Both are not synonyms, and pluralism is not just the recognition of diversity. Pluralism is a response to diversity, an engagement with diversity. According to her, pluralism, however, is not about melting or reducing differences or fusing them into syncretism. It is about the integrity and the encounter of diversity and difference. It does not require the shedding of distinctive cultural, religious, or political differences, but is the effort to create a society in and out of all these differences. Thus, the analysis of real pluralism needs to go beyond plotting the new outlines of our religious life, and go beyond the study of centres and the communities they represent to investigate the ways in which new religious communities have been actively engaged in American society.² Eck claimed that religious pluralism is a value in society, that we should understand more despite the differences of background which do not disregard other cultures and values. Eck also wrote about Ṭāriq Ramaḍān (1962), a Swiss-born Muslim theologian of Egyptian ancestry, who writes on religious pluralism. Ramadan began with the central theological point of Islam which is the doctrine of Tawhid: "It is the principle on which the whole of Islamic teaching rests and is the axis and point of reference on which Muslims rely in dialogue. The intimate awareness of tawhid forms the perception of the believer, who understands that plurality has been chosen by the One, that He is the God of all beings, and that He requires that each be respected... it is out of this conviction that Muslims engage in dialogue, and this is assumed in forming relations with each other."³

From the above statement Eck brought thought statement to support her views on diversity and pluralism. It seems that Ramaḍān understood

¹ Daniel G. Reid, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 911- 12.

² Banchoff, *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, 245.

³ Ibid., 257.

religious pluralism as religious plurality, which he connects with the doctrine of *tawhīd*. The doctrine of *tawhīd* acknowledges the diverse in religions as mentioned in many verses of the *Quran* that indicate diversity and plurality. One of the verses is: “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.”¹

It appears that the scholars in the above discussions understood religious pluralism as a form of religious diversity. Banchoff claimed religious pluralism as the interactions of various religions in the scope of society and politics whereby he understood religious pluralism in a political manner, while the Dictionary of America defines religious pluralism as diversity in religions and also from philosophical perspectives which defines it as many ways in understanding the Reality. Eck in defining religious pluralism made a distinction between pluralism and diversity whereby pluralism is beyond diversity, and it appears that she understood religious pluralism as the existence of different religions.

Moving on to the discussions of definitions from another perspective, Miroslav Volf wrote in his essay that one way to avoid clashes caused by certain religious perspectives would be to suggest that all religions are fundamentally the same. On the surface, the differences among them are obvious: from dress codes to obscure points of doctrine. But in this view, all differences are an external pod containing the same seed. “Lamps are different, but the light is the same,” said Jalāluddīn al-Rūmī², giving poetic expression to this interpretation of the connections amid religions. The term “pluralist” is a contemporary one christened by its proponents.³

Another description given by Joseph Augustine Di Noia is that pluralists are a variation of the inclusivist type who believes that all religious communities aim at salvation but do so under a variety of scheme-specific descriptions.⁴ Di Noia’s understanding of religious pluralism is eschatological; he claimed that all religions have their own salvation and it is not only Christianity, but that the way to God is relative in each religion. For example, in Hinduism, the way to be with God is through Moksha, while in Buddhism, to achieve true salvation from the attachment of the worldly desires is through Nirvana. These

¹ *Qurān* 49:13

² Jalāluddīn al-Rūmī was a Muslim Sufi mystic and poetic. The words are from one of his famous poem, entitled ‘One, One, One’ that has been translated into English by Andrew Harvey.

³ Banchoff, *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, p. 275.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 287.

examples can be related with Di Noia's definition of religious pluralism.

Dean in his writings stated that religious pluralism is a special challenge facing the world's religions today; yet religious diversity has always been with us. As the history of religions shows, each religion arose in a religiously plural environment and shaped itself in reaction to that plural phenomenon. The developed issues in plural societies have resulted in new perceptions and religious development.¹ He claims that religious pluralism is an agent of new perceptions towards religions and its progression.

It is understood that the idea of pluralism has been invoked to explain variations that exist in different contexts in human life. Most importantly, multiplicity, diversity, and differences, as opposed to homogeneity and unity characterized the fundamental criterion of pluralism as a philosophy.² Thus, Ibrahim stressed that religious pluralism in its layman term has been interpreted as referring to the multiplicity or diversity of religions. Ironically, she opined that the important point in the discussion of religious pluralism is not the quantity of religions, but mainly the variety of truth-claims those religions exhibit. According to Ibrahim, religious pluralism may be observed as a description of the worldwide phenomenon of diverse religious groups on the surface, but deep down in the technical sense, this philosophy technically refers to an interpretive concept relating to how one should handle the many competing truth-claims made by various religions.³ In understanding religious pluralism, Ibrahim asserted both etymological and technical perspectives which are a description of all different religions that exist in this world, and is related to the truth-claims of all these religions; that all of them carry the same truths to the Ultimate Reality.

Some scholars comment that another alternative way to define religious pluralism is to compare it with exclusivism and inclusivism. For example, Ibrahim in her book *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, stated that religious exclusivism celebrates the absolutist claim that only one religion is correct and all other religions are mistaken. Inclusivism opposes the former by holding that there is only one true religion, but other religion participates or partially reveal some of the truth of the authentic religion. Against both positions, religious pluralism suggest that all world religions are correct in the sense that each religion makes a common reference to a single sacred, transcendent or ultimate reality in

¹ Thomas Dean, ed., *Religious Pluralism and Truth: Essays on Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 45.

² Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism Christian and Muslim Responses* (Putrajaya: Islamic and Strategic Studies Institute, 2016), p. 18.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

different perspectives and thereupon every religion may be considered as following a way of salvation or path to God.¹

This definition is close to that of John Hick, a Western scholar who is often regarded as the forerunner and pioneer of religious pluralism as mentioned earlier. He had successfully developed the idea of religious pluralism into a tangible philosophical thought. Before going to Hick's definition of religious pluralism, it is essential to note here the view of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, another Christian theologian who wrestled with the question of religious plurality and its philosophy of religious pluralism.

Smith initially argued that the presently dominant conceptuality of the notion of 'a religion' has a history that can be traced back to the European Renaissance. It was then that the different streams of religious life began to be acknowledged in Western thought as solid structures called Christianity, Judaism and so forth. And having acknowledged their own faith in this way Westerners have then distributed the notion of 'a religion' to the rest of the world, causing others to think of themselves as belonging to the Hindu, or the Confucian, or the Buddhist religion, and so on, over others. However, Smith claimed that there is a way to make sense of these seemingly divisions in religions Smith claimed that there is something of vital religious significance taking different forms all over the world within the contexts of the different historical traditions. This 'something of vital religious significance' Smith called faith.²

This is the point where Hick agreed with the idea of 'faith' by Cantwell Smith, however, the former developed a new line of reasoning in understanding the word 'faith' which he regarded as the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. From this concept, Hick defined religious pluralism as: "...pluralism is the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness is manifestly taking place – and taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same extent."³

From the above definition, Hick interpreted religious pluralism as a view that all different world religions offer different paths to salvation that other religious paths are true or other religions might be equally true. Hick added:

¹ Ibid., p. 19 – 20.

² Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 29.

³ Ibid, p. 47.

“...the term refers to a particular theory of the relation between these traditions (religions), with their different and competing claims. This is the theory that the great world religions constitute variant conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to the on ultimate, mysterious divine reality...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.”¹

According to Hick, great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological ‘spaces’ within which are ‘ways’ along which men and women can find salvation/liberation/fulfilment.²

Apart from Hick, the American Catholic scholar, Paul F. Knitter is another important pluralist that should be mentioned here. Knitter suggested the idea of “unitive pluralism” in acknowledging the diversity of religions which together can embrace universal whole. He claimed that “in the modern multicultural world there cannot be just one religion, but neither can there be many that exist in ‘indifferent tolerance’.”³ Knitter embraced a personal view of truth in which the differences and particularities of religions are resolved, but are not materially equivalent. The plurality of religions is about the common harmonious of unlike parts together embracing a complex whole, which all religions together encompass the whole of what religion is as such. The divine reality expressed differently by different religions is not the One Reality behind each religion, rather, the One Reality that is incorporated by them all.

Besides all of the above definitions, it is essential to note the definitions of religious pluralism from the Malaysian scholars in this research because the researcher is discussing religious pluralism in Malaysia. Ismail Mina Ahmad wrote in his compilation of papers book, *Pluralisme Agama*, from the philosophical and religious thought perspectives, that it is a creed or concept or doctrine that states all religions are the same and carry the same truth whereby all religions require salvations in the hereafter spiritually, and physically.⁴

Another significant figure when discussing on religious pluralism in

¹ Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), p. 331.

² Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 36 – 37.

³ See Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985; *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995).

⁴ Ismail Mina Ahmad, ed., *Pluralisme Agama Satu Gerakan Iblis Memurtadkan Ummah* (Kuala Lumpur: Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia, 2012), p. 3.

Malaysia is Osman Bakar. He tried to deliver the idea of religious pluralism in a more positive manner by putting the word ‘Islamic’ before the word ‘pluralism’ in the hope that it will be more acceptable to the Muslims. He defines religious pluralism as; “The Islamic idea of pluralism is based on the concept of unity (al-Tawhid), more particularly on the idea of the relationship between the One and many. From the One we have many, through the many we are brought back to the One, from unity to multiplicity, through multiplicity back to unity.”¹

This definition held by Bakar showed that he perceives religious pluralism as religious diversity, and that is the reason why he accepts religious pluralism. This can be seen in his article entitled *Islam and the Challenge of Diversity and Pluralism: Must Islam Reform Itself?* in one of the main chapters in this article ‘Diversity and Pluralism: An Islamic Response’. A mere reading of the title is enough to indicate that Bakar puts pluralism similarly with diversity, as he said in his writing that in the Quran, the concept of diversity and pluralism is obviously mentioned in a number of places. This has brought him to a conclusion that religious pluralism is acceptable within Islam and it seemed to be far more inclusive before than now in its acceptance of other religions, compared to other religions including Christianity, which even until now its inclusiveness is still incomparable.²

The subtopic of the definition of religious pluralism in this research indicates two types of definitions; the first one regarding religious pluralism as being understood by some scholars as religious plurality. It is acknowledging the diversity of religions in this world, that people have different faiths and belief systems. The core definition that the researcher wants to highlight in this research is the second type of definition, coined by John Hick that can be simply understood as accepting the fact that all different religions carry the same truths which pave ways to God. Apart from that, the researcher came out with the discussions on religious pluralism by some of the Malaysian scholars which are very significant in order to unleash the rise of religious pluralism in the Malaysian context.

Epistemologically, the meaning of philosophy of religious pluralism can be understood from various definitions coined by different scholars, including the propagators, supporters, and those who opposed the idea. In analysing the meaning, the researcher found that in order to elude

¹ Ibid. p. 10.

² Osman Bakar, “Islam and the Challenge of Diversity and Pluralism: Must Islam Reform Itself?,” *Pluto Journals* 1 (October 2009): p. 68 – 69.

from confusion and misperception, it can be divided into two perspectives of understanding this philosophy. The first perspective of defining religious pluralism is equalizing it with the diversity of religions, whereby some scholars accept the idea of religious pluralism as the existence of many religions. In many examples the two terms have been considered as tantamount and used similarly. Nevertheless, both religious plurality and religious pluralism are different and many have not been able to differentiate them. In Malaysia, many pluralists thought that pluralism is the same as plurality. This type of understanding however has to be revised since it is also important to acknowledge the definition established by its promulgator who was John Hick. Thus, it cannot be simply said that this philosophy is as the same as religious diversity, because it carries a heavier and deeper meaning than diversity. Besides, the 'ism' shows that it is a kind of belief or ideology that has its own concepts, theories, and also supporters.

The second perspective of understanding religious pluralism is the philosophy or ideology that regards all religions as carrying the same manifestations to the single Truth. This is significant to be highlighted because it is the actual meaning of religious pluralism, and the real objective of its formation. Miroslav Volf claimed that religious pluralism is a way to avoid clashes by different religious perspectives by suggesting that all religions are fundamentally the same, despite of the obvious external differences from dress-codes to doctrines. Another definition from Di Noia showed that all religions have their own way of salvation not only through the doctrine of salvation in Christianity, but also in other religions in which the way to God is relative in each religion. It should be emphasized here the meanings or definitions claimed by Malaysian scholars as well to distinguish how they view religious pluralism. Ibrahim stated that religious pluralism may be observed as a description of a worldwide phenomenon of religious diversity on the surface, but deep down the technical sense of this philosophy refers to an interpretive concept relating to the issue of Truth-claim; that all of the existing religions carry the same truth or partial truth to the Ultimate Reality.

Notwithstanding all the above definitions, it is essential here to note the meaning of religious pluralism coined by the pioneer and developer of this philosophy, John Hick, and that the way the philosophy of religious pluralism was discussed by him is more profound. Although some attempts on this philosophy has been made by other earlier scholars, yet he was responsible for successfully developing the idea of

religious pluralism into a tangible philosophical thought. Initially, Wilfred Cantwell Smith had wrestled with the pluralistic theories of religion. He proposed that there is a 'way' to make sense of the divisions in religions which is the acknowledgement of others' vital religious significance, also called faith. Through the idea of Smith's 'faith', Hick developed a new line of reasoning in understanding the word which he regarded as the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. It is therefore the human transformation. Hick's principle for a proper response to the Reality hence placed all the major religious traditions on a more-or-less equivalent basis. It is accurate at this point that Hick's pluralism built tension with any religion that views itself as superior to the rest. He specifically confronted the Christian tradition on this point: "If we take literally the traditional belief that in Christ we have an uniquely full revelation of God and an uniquely direct relationship with God, so that in the church we are members of the body of Christ, taking the divine life into our lives in the Eucharist, and living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then surely this ought to produce some noticeable difference in our lives. Christians ought to be better human beings than those who lack these inestimable spiritual benefits. ... So we are stuck on the horns of a dilemma. We either have to claim, against the evidence of our experience, that as members of the body of Christ Christians in general are better human beings than non-Christians, or we are going to have to rethink those of our traditional doctrines that entail that."¹

It was in contradiction of the framework of religious exclusivism of traditional Christian theology as well as racial discrimination that Hick established his personal faith in religious pluralism. He questioned the traditional idea of exclusive truth held in Christianity and demanded the reinterpretation of Incarnation for he believed this is the root of exclusivism of Christianity. He proclaimed that Incarnation should be understood as a symbolical, metaphorical or mythic rather than a literal truth."² As a result, this has taken him and a few of his friends to produce chapters in a book named *The Myth of God Incarnate* in 1977. The work underwent incandescent reactions from the British churches that to some extent was rated deviating.³ Later in 1993 he wrote another book entitled *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*. "I came fairly soon to see

¹ John Hick, "The Next Step Beyond Dialogue," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Obris, 2005), p. 8.

² Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-15.

that for Christianity the problem of religious plurality hinged on the central doctrine of the incarnation. If Jesus was God incarnate, Christianity alone among the world religions was founded by God in person and must therefore be uniquely superior to all others. This made me look again at the traditional doctrine and its history.”¹

According to Hick, the traditional doctrine of incarnation in Christianity as well as most forms of inclusivism are against the reality of human life and have some inconsistency amid theological theory and observable fact. This is the reason why Hick came out with such a concept to be in line with the current and present situation that he wanted Christianity to be a religion accepted by all people regardless of the religious background, and perceived other religions the same way as he perceived Christianity. Hick interpreted religious pluralism as a view that all different world religions offer different paths to salvation, whereby other religious paths are true or other religions might be equally true. His pluralist theory is both a recent and religious viewpoint that creates reliability by adopting an extensive range of philosophical and theological resources in a way that also fits the empirical phenomenology of religion and meets modern sensibilities. In the face of Hick's statements, it is necessary to recognize that religious pluralism is a philosophy that emerges from inside Christian theology, namely exclusive theology. In the beginning, Hick devised religious pluralism to assist him to apprehend the many truth-claim exhibits by religions. It is important to note that religious pluralism does not merely compromise recognition to the plurality of religions. In fact, religious pluralism encompasses in levelling the Truth in all religions for every religion symbolizes different paths to the same Truth (the *Real an-sich*).

After discussing religious pluralism epistemologically, it is interesting to note the first definition mentioned above, which is diversity of religion. Why is there such confusion? The reason that might be behind the confusion is to make people accept religious pluralism. If they understand it as religious diversity, then they will accept and acknowledge the philosophy without any doubt to celebrate the diverse religions of the world. Therefore, people will get confused while understanding religious pluralism as religious diversity without knowing the true meaning behind it. Another reason is that the confusion will make religious pluralism accepted as a tool of peace-making and harmony between different religions and thus people will appreciate and

¹ John Hick, *John Hick: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2002), p. 227.

uphold this philosophy in the name of celebrating diversity among religions while being blindfold by its real meaning. According to Prof Naquib Al-Attas when he discussed on the issue of Transcendent Unity of Religions, he claimed that “this confusion might be intentionally created in order to protect the untruth”.¹ When the real meaning of religious pluralism is blurred, there will be chance for this theory and idea to spread widely among Muslims without knowing the real meaning and thus there will be no resistance or counteraction towards this philosophy. It appears that when this occurs, many people believe in religious pluralism to be mean religious diversity or tolerance in the diverse of religions which is a natural phenomenon in Islam. Hence, the falsification and fabrication revealed the motive to make people confused of the real meaning.

Some scholars, such as Diana L. Eck, tend to accept religious pluralism just because they understood it as religious diversity. This is inaccurate because the role of John Hick in developing the idea of religious pluralism is undeniable. It is crucial to present the idea of John Hick because he was the pioneer of the philosophy of religious pluralism, and to do just to him, the philosophy has to be understood as it is, without being confused by the meaning from other later scholars that perceive it as religious diversity and religious tolerance. Taking religious pluralism as religious diversity is actually negating the role of John Hick in developing and establishing the premises, for this philosophy cannot simply take it out of its real context. In fact, removing John Hick and his role in popularizing the term religious pluralism is not objective and is an injustice to the philosophy and its founder.

The Historical Background of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia

Meanwhile, the historical background of religious pluralism in Malaysia is much related with the nature of diversity in race and religion among Malaysians and thus made this philosophy associated with the concept of diversity in the country.

In the case of Malaysia, plurality is recognised in its pronouncement in the state ideologies, the *Rukunegara*,² which somehow has become

¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam* (Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2007), p. 32.

² Syed Hussein Al-Atas, *Pacific Community: The Rukunegara and the Return to Democracy in Malaysia*, vol. 2 (University of California: Pacific News Commonwealth, 1971), pp. 800 – 808.

less prominent in the recent decades.¹ In the Malaysian intellectual and public discourse we can see a relatively active discussion in both English and Malay on plurality rather than pluralism. Plurality is generally accepted as the basis for maintaining the diversity of a nation, without much openness to the deeper complexities that obstruct the introduction of the kind of pluralism that is essential for nation building.² However, recently, the philosophy of religious pluralism has been exposed to the Malaysian society by its proponents that believe it will become one of the peace-making tools of a multiracial and multi-religious country.³ It implies that behind the idea of plurality in Malaysia, this philosophy is in disguise the name of maintaining the sustainability of peace and harmony regardless of different races and religions among Malaysians.

It is important to note here that religious pluralism is a relatively new discourse in the Malaysian setting and academia. This philosophy however is much known among modern Muslim thinkers who have made their basis thought from the Western views. Thoha in his book⁴ claimed that the philosophy entered the Islamic world through the writings of Western Muslim thinkers like Rene Guenon also known as Abdul Wahid Yahya (1886-1951)⁵ and Frithjof Schuon, also known as Isa Nuruddin Ahmad (1907-1998).⁶ Even though they spoke of the perennial philosophy on the transcendent unity of religion, these ideas might contribute to the formation of philosophy of religious pluralism. The opuses of the thinkers are rich with ideas and thought that resulted

¹ Azhar Ibrahim, *Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesian World: Critical Perspectives* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2014), p. 166.

² Ibid. p. 174.

³ Haslina Ibrahim, "Dari Kepelbagaian Agama Kepada Pluralisme Agama: Sejarah Perkembangan," *IIUM Repository (IREP)*, 2011, 1.

⁴ Thoha, *Tren Pluralisme Agama: Tinjauan Kritis*, p. 23.

⁵ Rene Guenon was a French writer and an intellectual thinker who remains as a prominent figure in the field of metaphysics, "sacred science" and religious studies. He studied the Eastern religions specifically Hinduism, Taoism and Islam. He embraced Islam on 1912 and used the name of Abdul Wahid Yahya. Many of his writings were in French language and have been translated to English. Some of them are *The Symbolism of the Cross*; *The Crisis of the Modern World*; and *The Multiple State of Being*.

⁶ Frithjof Schuon was a German writer born in Switzerland. He was a philosopher and metaphysicist. From his journey to North Africa, East, India and America, he had met many religious figure from all parts of the world, includes the Muslim Sufis, Indian sages and Buddha monks. Some of his famous writings are *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*; *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*; *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, *Perennial Philosophy in Islam* and *Understanding Islam*.

in the root and inspiration towards the development of religious pluralism discourse in the Islamic world.

Muslims Response to Religious Pluralism in Malaysia

In order to identify the Muslims' response in Malaysia to the philosophy of religious pluralism, the researcher refers to the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia. This is because the groups of those known as revivalists are those who denounce against the philosophy, and they are the ones who actively voices out this issue while trying their best to make Muslims in Malaysia understand the threat brought by supporters of religious pluralism.

One organization that serves as an example of revivalists in Malaysia is the youth group, ABIM, which stresses education, Islamic identity, and understanding among Muslims. It was founded in 1971 by former members of the National Association of Malaysian Islam Student (PKPIM), and its main membership comes from the youth in institutes of higher learning.¹ ABIM also gives top priority to Islamicizing the *ummah*.²

It is important to highlight the efforts of scholars who formulated the Islamic worldview in a clearer version to make the distinction between the Islamic worldview and the Western worldview from the educational perspective. Without true perspective and knowledge, Muslims can easily be influenced with the ideologies and philosophies other than Islam. In Malaysia, among the earliest and prominent scholar in formatting the concept and philosophy of knowledge or science is Professor Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.³ The awareness of the need for alternative ways to face the challenges from Western philosophies and ideologies can be said to be much fostered by Zulkifli Muhammad (1927-1964).⁴ According to him, an educated Muslim is someone who sees his life from the Islamic worldview, and this state can be achieved when he has a strong foundation of *tawhīd* and Islamic soul.⁵ Apart from the early effort of Zulkifli Muhammad, a clearer and

¹ Ahmed Shabery Cheek and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, "The Politics of Malaysia's Islamic Resurgence," *Third World Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1988), p. 846.

² Robert Day McAmis, *Malay Muslims* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 81.

³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and the Philosophy of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1989).

⁴ Mohamad Redzuan Othman, "Perjuangan Politik Zulkifli Muhammad," in *Perak Dahulu Dan Sekarang*, ed. Adnan Haji Nawang (Persatuan Muzium Malaysia, 1988), 106–36.

⁵ Zulkifli Muhammad, "Pendidikan Dan Mendidik," in *Zulkifli Muhammad Sejarah Dan Karyanya*, ed. Ismail Awang (Kota Bharu: Mahligai Press, 1981), 16–24.

more meaningful effort can be seen from the formulation by Muhammad Kamal Hassan.¹ According to Kamal Hassan, Islamic education is determined by the worldview of Islam and the Islamic way of life is based on faith that sees everything as unified and integrated, not separate into two water-tight compartments such as in the secular worldview. The Tawhidic paradigm or *Tawhidic weltanschauung* plays a role to determine the education process as a whole.²

In addition, an organisation named Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) is one of the NGOs that strongly criticised and rejected religious pluralism. IKIM was founded on 18 February 1992 with the intention of presenting the right understanding of Islam by means of various programmes and activities such as research, conferences, discussions, seminars, consultancies, teaching and publishing. IKIM was formally launched on 3rd July 1992 by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia.³

In response to the issue of religious pluralism in Malaysia, IKIM has made press statements on the philosophy dated December 23, 2010. In the statements, the organization clarified some important points highlighting the Islamic point of view on the philosophy, and also on Islamic perspective on diversity which stated that;⁴

1. Islam rejects religious pluralism that professes all religions are similarly true and equally good.
2. Only one religion owns the precise and comprehensive revelation that is Islam.⁵
3. On religious diversity, Islam nonetheless acknowledges that truth, goodness and ethical beauty do prevail in the other religions. While Islam prohibits the practice of making religion ridiculed and a game, it always welcomes just, unprejudiced and truthful attitudes along with honesty, wherever they may have originated. Such ethical goodness and beauty should be practiced to drive the Malaysian society towards success and peace.

¹ Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah, *Pemikiran Islam Di Malaysia: Sejarah Dan Aliran*, p. 382.

² Muhammad Kamal Hassan, *Pendidikan Dan Pembangunan: Suatu Perspektif Bersepadu* (Kuala Lumpur: Nurin Enterprise, 1988), p. 131–32, p. 162.

³ Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, "Introduction," *Ikim.gov.my*, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://www.ikim.gov.my/new-wp/index.php/introduction-the-establishment/>.

⁴ Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), "Press Statement Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) on Religious Pluralism," *Malaysia-Today.net*, December 23, 2010, <http://www.malaysia-today.net/press-statement-institute-of-islamic-understanding-malaysia-ikim-on-religious-pluralism/>

⁵ *Qurān*, 5:3.

4. National unity ought to be cultivated by revitalizing the uniqueness of each religious custom and concurrently heartening the view of common generosity, shared compassion and mutual love as fellow citizens and fellow human beings who were created from one living entity notwithstanding their religious differences.
5. Matters between different religious followers have to be settled with the highest fairness, justice and with the spirit of mutual respect towards religious principles.
6. Followers of different religions should also be encouraged to strive in the efforts of virtuous deeds, for instance, in preserving the rights of the unfortunate and the needy, encouraging noble deeds and disallowing immoral deeds, to both the common citizens and leaders by way of truthful and cultivated means.

These indicate that IKIM responded to religious pluralism in Malaysia by stressing on the stand of Islam towards this philosophy and pointed out the Islamic point of view on the acknowledgment of diversity of religions or plurality. Besides that, this organization also stated some important points on the importance of living with a multi-religious environment as in Malaysia by highlighting the common features in every religion and upholding the moral virtues which are essential in any religion.

Another significant NGO in Malaysia that should be mentioned here in responding to the philosophy of liberalism and religious pluralism is Malaysian Muslim Solidarity (ISMA). The NGO was initiated in 1997 with the former name *Ikatan Siswazah Muslim Malaysia*, which was been later, altered to *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* in 2005.¹ ISMA is incorporated with various kinds of Islamic propagation programmes and activities. The main objective of this organization is predominantly concentrated on the Malay and Muslims in Malaysia based on their motto in Malay, "*Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat*" which literally means "Unanimous Malay, Supreme Islam".² ISMA now has 23 branches nationwide and 8 international branches.

In one of the agendas of ISMA, stated in its official website, is to defend Islam as a national identity. It stated that ISMA is constantly striving

¹ ISMA, "Profil ISMA," *Isma: Membangun Umat Beragenda*, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://isma.org.my/v2/profil-isma/>.

² Wikipedia, "Malaysian Muslim Solidarity," *Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed April 8, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian_Muslim_Solidarity.

to strengthen the doctrine of Islam as an official religion enshrined in the Federal Constitution. Thus, ISMA become a forefront in raising public awareness of the elements that threaten their identity and beliefs like the ideology and movement of missionaries, liberalism, secularism, pluralism, *Shī'ah* and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender). ISMA has also been outspoken in defending the rights and interests of Muslims in Malaysia and reject foreign interference in determining the country's future. On this basis, ISMA rejected explicitly the claims of the NGO Coalition on Human Rights (COMANGO) to the government which were to abolish the privileges of the Malays, entitles Muslim to apostasy and recognizes the rights of LGBT minorities to practice their twisted sexual orientation. Through a massive campaign across the country, ISMA managed to persuade a number of 740,000 people to sign a petition of Malaysia anti-COMANGO in a short period of time.¹

Apart from that, ISMA has also been actively participating in one of the NGOs that boldly voiced out the issue of liberalism and religious pluralism in Malaysia. The Islamist group said that liberalism can only synchronize with Islam if it is enthusiastic to succumb to an Islamic system, as the ideology is a ductile man-made structure compared to a religion that is given by God. Speaking in a forum on liberalism and faith, ISMA president Abdullah Zaik Abd Rahman said Islam cannot be transformed or modified by any parties, admonishing so-called liberal Muslims for using Western philosophies born of dark ages in doing so.² Abdullah spoke in the Liberalism Conference held by the think-tank Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), that; "Liberalism can live hand-in-hand with faith, only if it's willing to live under an Islamic system, and if liberalism tries to redefine or reform Islam following the demands of liberal basis, that maybe can never be accepted by Islam."³

The president of ISMA had also associated liberalism to religious pluralism, viewing the ideology as born resulting from the ancient dark ages in the Western world history, in reaction to the supremacy of the Church. Another issue that ISMA had voiced out regarding liberalism in Malaysia is when a former United Malays National Organization's (UMNO) Supreme Council member Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah uttered a

¹ ISMA, "Profil ISMA."

² Zurairi AR, "Liberalism Must Submit to Islam to Co-Exist, Says Isma," *Malaymail Online*, September 19, 2015, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/liberalism-must-submit-to-islam-to-co-exist-says-isma>.

³ Ibid.

statement "liberal Malay will not make the individual less Muslim or less Malay".¹ In a press statement on ISMA's website, the deputy president, Aminuddin Yahaya claimed Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah's statement, as perplexing; "I wish to claim that there is a major misconception on Saifuddin's understanding on Rukun Negara and his concept of liberalism, that the most absolute document is the Federal Constitution while the Rukun Negara is a sub-set of the Constitution.

The word 'liberalism' is mentioned to as accepting other races, religion and cultures and not diluting every race. The positions of the Malays are also preserved under Article 153 of the Constitution. Protecting a religion or race is not something that is dangerous or racist or can divide the nation. They (liberals) discard all the requirements mentioned above, including the Islamic religion and Malay race. They want to generate a Malaysian nation and religious pluralism, which had been brought from the West. Both are like a set to go against religion and race. This is understandably against any religion, not to mention Islam."²

It appears that ISMA has become one of the many organisations that responded to the issue of liberalism and religious pluralism in Malaysia. Interestingly, in one of the statements that ISMA had voice out, its president claimed that liberalism can be in tune with Islam as long as the philosophy submits to the teachings of Islam.

It is interesting also to note that apart from responding to the philosophy of liberalism and religious pluralism in Malaysia, some organizations also encountered controversial issues related to both philosophies, such as conversion, apostasy and feminism. These issues seem to be the consequences from the ideas and concepts of the philosophies, which gave much impact to Muslims in Malaysia. In responding to these issues, the Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN) has taken many efforts to fight against the issue of conversion in Malaysia. ACCIN is an umbrella organization encompassing Islamic NGOs which are assigned to one of its central goals which is the dissemination of Islam, with a vision to assure the *sharī'ah* law is applied in Malaysia.³ Their participants are commonly from the urban middle class, students or professionals, but the divisions spread all over the country

¹ The Rakyat Post, "Isma 'Teaches' Saifuddin on Liberalism," *The Rakyat Post*, September 17, 2014, <http://www.therakyatpost.com/news/2014/09/17/isma-teaches-saifuddin-liberalism/#ixzz3DZBRGrsi>.

² Ibid.

³ Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs, "About Us," *Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs*, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://accin.org/about-us/>.

permit to reach people from most, if not all, social backgrounds. Their programmes range from Islamic and general learning, community service, to preaching. Generally, their financial supply derives from their supporters and they have their own website and bulletin.

ACCIN outlined its roots to corresponded efforts, in 2005, to object the establishment of an Interfaith Commission (IFC).¹ As such, according to Fauzi, the IFC is viewed as a secular legal community's front intended to challenge the power of the state's departments of Islamic affairs, to avoid *shari'ah* courts in Islamic legal affairs, and to intervene in intra-Muslim matters. With regards to the Azlina Jailani aka Lina Joy's case, ACCIN was among the joint-product of Muslim NGOs' concerned efforts to challenge Islam's ingrained position in the Federal Constitution and the national polity.² It is therefore not surprising that ACCIN's frequent issue is relating to the "Article 11" Alliances and their followers. ACCIN's target is undoubtedly to put a conclusion to the discourse started by the "Article 11" Alliances and counter their opinions in support of freedom of conversion in Islam. ACCIN has taken the outlook that "Article 11" is a threat to Islam and to the right of Muslims to live under Islamic principles and laws.³

Apart from the NGOs and groups mentioned above, the Malaysian governments also played a crucial role in exterminating the philosophies of liberalism and religious pluralism in Malaysia. In July 2012, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak made a statement that "deviant aspects such as liberalism, pluralism and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) would not have a place in the country."⁴

According to an independent news website, The Malaysian Insider, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak declared "LGBTs, pluralism, and liberalism – all these 'isms' are against Islam and it is compulsory for us to fight these". He was giving a speech at an occasion involving 11,000 Islamic religious leaders and mosque committee members from around Malaysia.⁵

Apart from the organizations, there are many responses from

¹ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Islamist Civil Society Activism in Malaysia under Abdullah Badawi: The Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) and the Darul Arqam," *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 16, no. 3 (2009), p. 444.

² Ibid, p. 453.

³ Sophie Lemi re, "Apostasy & Islamic Civil Society in Malaysia," *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World ISIM* 20, no. 1 (2007), p. 47.

⁴ News Editor, "Malaysia PM: LGBTs, Liberalism, Pluralism Are Enemies of Islam," *The Malaysian Insider*, July 20, 2012, <http://www.fridae.asia/gay-news/2012/07/20/11812.malaysia-pm-lgbts-liberalism-pluralism-are-enemies-of-islam>.

⁵ Ibid.

distinguished figures and influential individuals who disregard the philosophies of liberalism and religious pluralism and its proponents in Malaysia.

Ismail Mina Ahmad is another figure that has contributed in responding to the issue of liberalism and religious pluralism in Malaysia. Being a president of an NGO named *Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia* (MUAFAKAT), he had been involved in many of the press statements, teachings, lectures and talks that respond to the issues related to liberalism and religious pluralism in Malaysia. MUAFAKAT was established on July 20, 2004 with an objective to consolidate Muslims' NGOs in Malaysia and unite them, by consensus to protect the rights and care for the welfare as well as to improve their living standards in all fields including social, economic, education, culture, philosophy and technology.¹ Besides that, in accordance with the position of Islam as the official religion of the country, MUAFAKAT also aims to promote and maintain the status of Islam in the country as guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the State governments in Malaysia, in accordance with the hopes of the majority of the Muslim population in this country.²

According to Mina, the philosophy of religious pluralism in Malaysia can be divided into some schools or groups, which can be differentiated by the way they understand religious pluralism's meaning. He claimed in his book of compilation of papers on religious pluralism, *Pluralisme Agama: Satu Gerakan Iblis Memurtadkan Ummah*, that;

The first group is the teaching of Ariffin Terengganu or also known popularly by the name *Ayah Pin*. The founder of this teaching beliefs all religions are the same in spiritual aspect and all the physical rituals are under one ultimate power from the heaven and hence, his teaching is known as *Kerajaan Langit* or Kingdom of Heavens. The second group is the ideology or philosophy of The Transcendent Unity of Religions or also known as Perennial Philosophy or Sophia Perrenis. The important figures in promoting this philosophy were Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and Seyyed Hossen Nasr. They believe that all religions are similar in the internal aspects, even though the external parts are different such as in the rituals and doctrines. Thus, all these religions are one in esoteric meaning, and finally will bring their followers to The One, that is Allah and eventually will get salvation in the hereafter. The third group of religious pluralism is

¹ Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia, "Latar Belakang," MUAFAKAT, accessed April 8, 2017, <https://muafakatmalaysia.wordpress.com/latar-belakang/>.

² Ibid.

the followers of John Hick's teaching, which believe that all religions have the same truth claims and all are relatively true. Hick's philosophy was being supported by Anwar Ibrahim, Khalid Jaafar and in a little bit different, Hashim Kamali and also some other figures in Malaysia. The fourth group of religious pluralism in Malaysia is the concept of Islamic Pluralism introduced by Osman Bakar.¹

It can be seen here that Mina in his writing had analysed the reality of religious pluralism in Malaysia, and claimed some figures to be the followers of this philosophy.

Obviously, he denied and rejected the philosophy, which also according to him, derived from the philosophy of liberalism.

Hence, it shows that Muslims in Malaysia have serious concern regarding liberalism and religious pluralism, and how these philosophies threaten the faith of Muslims in Malaysia. Nevertheless, more intellectual and academic discourses are required to provide objective criticisms to the philosophies so that the current and future generations understand the ideologies that are totally against the teachings of Islam.

Critics of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia

Obviously, Hick's version of religious pluralism is a challenge to Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. Malaysia is a good testing ground for promoting religious pluralism due to the multiracial and multi-religious settings and backgrounds in Malaysia. Therefore, when the philosophy of religious pluralism enters Malaysia, it hides its real meaning through using a very noble objective, which is as a means of tolerance and peace-building among different religions. The Islamic setting of Malaysia somehow is undeniable especially when a scholar tries to make religious pluralism 'Islamic' to support the philosophy. In his writing, Prof Osman Bakar claimed that a new version of religious pluralism should be introduced to Muslims in Malaysia through an Islamic viewpoint.² Islamic Pluralism that has been introduced by Prof Osman Bakar seems to be vaguely discussed and it shares some of the visions and objectives secured by Hick's religious pluralism. Osman Bakar referred his idea of Islamic pluralism to the story of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) focused on the occasion of the formation of Madinah. According to him, "ethnic

¹ Ismail Mina Ahmad, *Pluralisme Agama Satu Gerakan Iblis Memurtadkan Ummah*, pp. 3-9.

² Osman Bakar, *The Quran on Interfaith and Inter-Civilization Dialogue: Interpreting a Divine Message for Twenty-First Century Humanity* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought Malaysia, 2006), p. 16.

and religious pluralism was a contemporary issue for the Prophet, because his mission was, among others, to create out of ‘Arabian pluralism’ a model of multi-faith and multi-ethnic living...”.¹

It is essential to emphasize that the tolerance of Prophet Muhammad towards others does not signify the acceptance of their beliefs. As such, the Prophet acknowledged the existence of religious diversity, and not accepts that the other religions were true in its respective truth claims. He advocated tolerance among his companions with followers of other religions, but he was not defending their faith. This has been indicated in the *Quran* on the revelation of *sūrah al-Kāfirūn* (the disbelievers). Allah presented the Muslims the eternal lessons that they ought to absolve themselves by expression and action from the faith of the disbelievers wherever and in whatever method it be, and should proclaim without any doubt that they are prohibited in making any concession with the disbelievers in the matter of faith.² In the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with the Christians, Prophet Muhammad can be seen as a proponent for a religiously pluralistic society.³ He did not only take account of the interests of Christians, but he protected them; he also established a preference for tolerance and respect in the sense that he viewed Christianity as having some common values that were in-line with Islamic values and principles. The fact that Prof Osman is concerned about the way Muslims perceive coexistence and how to live with non-Muslims harmoniously is undeniable and it might be for that reason that he came up with the idea of Islamic pluralism. However, when he introduced this idea, there was setback in the term he used, which is Islamic pluralism, because the philosophy of religious pluralism regards religion by human interpretation, whereas Muslims accept Islam as a revelation which means our knowledge is guided by revelation and does not come by human interpretation.

The philosophies of liberalism and religious pluralism have spread its teachings and ideologies years back in Malaysia. In the globalized and cosmopolitan world of today, the knowledge and understanding of these philosophies is a necessity to put into proper perspective and context what these philosophies are all about, and also to understand the challenges that both bring to Malaysia. Without a proper and true understanding of liberalism and religious pluralism, Muslims in Malaysia risk entering into

¹ Ibid, p. 21.

² Sayyid Abul ‘Ala Maudūdī, “Surah Al Kafirun (The Disbelievers),” *Englishtafsir.com*, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://englishtafsir.com/quran/109/index.html>.

³ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Diversity and Pluralism: A Quranic Perspective,” p. 34–35.

two extremely contradicting positions; total submission to or total rejection of the philosophy and yet with lack of sound judgment. Therefore, a proper, comprehensive and wholesome knowledge of these Western philosophies is not only necessary for the faith and interest of the Muslim community, but proper knowledge of the concepts and ideas are also essential to ensure the purity of Islam remains protected, and not influenced by those ideologies particularly in Malaysia.

Conclusion

The significant philosophy highlighted in this research is the philosophy of religious pluralism. The researcher commends that John Hick's definition of religious pluralism should be regarded for he was the one who coined and formulated the philosophy. Hence, addressing religious pluralism to its superficial meaning which is religious plurality is somewhat misleading. Therefore, in this research, the original meaning of religious pluralism as proposed by John Hick has been emphasized. To put it in the words of John Hick "religious pluralism can be simply understood as accepting the fact that all different religions carry the same truths which pave the ways to God".¹

In the case of Malaysia, it is widely known that Malaysia is a pluralistic nation, and the social structure of the society is very complex as it is composed of diverse religions, ethnicities, races, cultures, languages and levels of education. Religious pluralism, however, is a relatively new idea to many of the Malaysian society. Some Malaysians have mistakenly adopting the meaning of religious pluralism as religious diversity and took it as an instrumental concept for promoting religious tolerance in Malaysia. Some Muslims in Malaysia are against this philosophy, as it contradicts with Islamic teachings particularly in the matter of *tawhīd* which signifies the Oneness of God. In addition, religious pluralism has been referred to the liberalist group in Malaysia, who promotes the ideas of freedom of conversion to the Malays and freedom of choosing sexual orientation among the LGBT supporters.

Having presented the narrative of religious pluralism in the previous chapters, it is essential to stress that the challenges brought by these philosophies towards the sanctity of Islam in particular, and also other religions in general, are real. Both philosophies marginalized religion and spirituality for the sake of defending human rights and freedom. However, at the extreme, the liberal group went beyond the accepted norms and values upheld by the society.

¹ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, p. 10.

Also, having discussed the response of Malaysians' groups and scholars on the philosophy of liberalism and religious pluralism, it is important to ensure that more response should be voice out, in order to alarm the Muslims on the challenges brought by this philosophy, new and fresh response from Muslims youth's organizations, volunteers' groups, and scholars should be increase to cope with the new and advanced issues related to liberalism and religious pluralism. The challenges today are very strong and powerful for there are many young generations even from the Muslims themselves who supported the ideas of these philosophies and thus, the need to innovative and fresh response from the young generations are very crucial to preserve the true Islamic teachings from the modern ideology challenges.

It is therefore proposed that more effort be done to generate public awareness and knowledge on religious pluralism in the hope that they are able to comprehend the negative and the positive impacts (if any) of the philosophies. However, let it be reminded that the support for or against religion should not be overblown out of proportion for this will lead into extremisms and fanaticism of sorts, and many communities have indeed witnessed and suffered through such extremism. Therefore, one should avoid being too liberal or too rigid as Islam has already promoted the middle point, a balanced position, that will ensure a well-balanced life that generates harmony in a life full of diversity.

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