Intellectual Discourse

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Contents

Going to Hell or Heaven? An Analysis of Malaysian Muslims' Perspectives on Extremism in Religion

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Abstract: Religion has long been the focus of research looking into terrorism and extremism. However, previous researches tend to focus heavily on terrorist and extremist groups who have committed acts of terrorism. This study further expands the literature by analysing how the public perceive extreme elements in their daily religious routines in a multicultural society in Malaysia, employing four dimensions of religiosity, namely, physical, social, cognitive, and spiritual. This research utilised a survey method and distributed it to 497 Malay Malaysian Muslims in 2019. Using descriptive statistical analysis, it was found that there is a tendency for Malaysian Muslims to be more perceptive towards religious extremism, as the majority of the sampling population showed strong support towards the visible aspects of religiosity indicators, such as strict adherence to religious dress code and physical rituals that can be managed and administered through the establishment of a legal institution and can reinforce their status quo as the majority group in society, rather than intangible aspects of extreme religiosity, such as cognitive and spiritual aspects. However, this study also found that extreme religiosity in religious practices is not necessarily an

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indicator for society to support extremist religious ideologies, as the Malaysian Muslims also showed positive tendencies of living in a multi-faith society. This finding provides insights into how the prevention of religious extremism should address social elements of religiosity and should not be taken care of in isolation, as well as should consider the complex historical and social dimensions of society. As such, this paper contributes to the understanding of Malaysian Muslims' perceptions of religious extremism in their daily religious practices in a multicultural society.

Keywords: religious extremism; Islam; religious harmony; multiculturalism; Malaysia

Abstrak: Agama merupakan salah satu tumpuan utama penyelidikan berkaitan isu keganasan dan ektremisme. Walau bagaimanapun, penyelidikan terdahulu lebih cenderung mengkaji kumpulan pengganas dan pelampau yang telah melakukan keganasan. Oleh yang sedemikian, kajian ini dihasilkan bertujuan untuk menganalisis pendapat orang awam mengenai unsur-unsur kegiatan melampau yang melibatkan agama dalam masyarakat pelbagai budaya di Malaysia. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kaji selidik yang menggariskan empat dimensi dalam beragama sebagai penanda aras; fizikal, sosial, kognitif, dan rohani. Soal selidik kajian ini telah diedarkan kepada 497 responden yang terdiri daripada individu berbangsa Melayu dan beragama Islam di Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia pada tahun 2019. Dengan menggunakan analisis statistik deskriptif, kajian ini mendapati bahawa terdapat kecenderungan umat Islam Malaysia terhadap elemen fahaman melampau agama. Sampel majoriti penduduk menunjukkan sokongan yang tinggi terhadap aspek fizikal keagamaan seperti pematuhan kod pakaian agama yang ketat dan pentadbiran institusi undang-undang mengikut undang-undang Islam kerana ini dapat mengukuhkan status quo mereka sebagai kumpulan majoriti dalam masyarakat. Kajian ini mendapati responden mempunyai toleransi agama yang lebih tinggi dalam aspek yang tidak ketara dalam keagamaan seperti aspek kognitif dan rohani. Namun begitu, kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa kecenderungan terhadap aspek esktrem dalam beragama tidak semestinya menjadi kayu ukur sokongan sesebuah masyarakat kepada ideologi ekstremisme agama. Analisis mendapati umat Islam Malaysia menunjukkan kecenderungan positif untuk hidup secara harmoni dalam masyarakat berbilang agama dan menerima hak penganut agama lain untuk mengamalkan agama mereka secara terbuka di Malaysia. Hasil kajian ini memberi gambaran bahawa aspek kemasyarakatan agama, sejarah dan latar belakang sosial perlu diambil kira dalam mencegah kegiatan ekstremisme agama. Oleh itu, penyelidikan ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman persepsi umat Islam Malaysia terhadap aspek ekstrem beragama dalam masyarakat berbilang budaya.

Kata Kunci: Ekstremisme agama; Islam; keharmonian agama; kepelbagaian budaya; Malaysia

Introduction

Religion has long been an important aspect of human life. Research has shown that individuals' religiosity has a positive impact on their well-being (Tiliouine et al., 2008; S. Saleem & T.Saleem, 2017; Villani et al., 2019). Despite this, religious extremism is a controversial term and the definition has been discussed extensively by scholars with different interpretations of its meaning. The term extremism itself poses an academic challenge to scholars in terms of determining the scope and the boundary of extremism. Extremism is viewed as anti-establishment acts that often involve deviation from social norms for the purpose of achieving the objectives of a particular ideology/belief. Galeotti (2002) interpreted extremism as "a challenge to the existing and values of politics, (it) is a phenomenon that features in any constitutional order, democratic or non-democratic alike, and its evolution" (p. 177). On the other hand, Coleman and Bartoli (2015) described extremism as "a complex phenomenon, although its complexity is often hard to see. Most simply, it can be defined as activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, and strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary." Meanwhile, Bötticher (2017), in her efforts to have a consensual academic definition of extremism, defined it as:

> …an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements, which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good.

Schmid (2014) developed 20 indicators in an effort to measure extremism, which includes the rejection of liberal democratic values, intolerance towards differences, and the display of anti-democratic traits such as authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies. However, this definition seems to be applicable only to liberal democratic societies and cannot travel beyond this specific setting. This reflects the complexity of defining extremism due to its subjectivity.

Thus, religious extremism also displays similar intellectual challenges when it comes to accurately defining it. The absence of consensual definition does not specify the measurement used to indicate the level of religious extremism and opens room for vagueness and indistinctness of what counts as religious extremism. Yusuf Qaradawi, a renowned and, at times, controversial Muslim scholar questioned the authority of defining one's religious practices as extreme, as he argued that strict adherence towards religious teachings that one identifies as righteous, such as growing a long beard by conservative Muslim men and wearing veils by Muslim women, do not place them as religious extremists (Qaradawi, 2006). Wibisono et.al (2019) defines extremism as " the extent to which there are clear norms about appropriate behavior and very little latitude in accepting different patterns of norms or particular behaviors" which focuses more on the norms and the flexibility in accepting differences in a particular society.

Despite the complexity in defining religious extremism, it has been identified as one of the main drivers of terrorism (Henne et al., 2012; Henne, 2019). This has resulted in scholarly works that often discuss religious extremism in connection with terrorism or terrorist groups (Badey, 2002; Pratt, 2010; Deckard et al., 2015; Henne, 2017, Egger & Magni-Berton, 2019). As a result, religious extremism is often equated with terrorism and radicalisation, which simplifies the analysis of religious extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Prinsloo, 2018). Esposito (2015) posited that religious extremism is not simply a product of religious teachings, but rather a combination of historical and political factors that drive the support towards religious extremist movements such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda.

Malaysia is not exempted from facing the issue of religious extremism, especially considering that it has deep ethnic and religious cleavages due to strong identity markers attached to ethnicity and religion. Malaysia has also become a hotspot for terrorist groups that utilise religion to recruit new members, as well as to spread their violent ideology in the region. In 2016, police cracked down on ISIS-related groups following a bombing at a nightclub in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. Apart from local threats, Malaysian Muslims were also actively recruited using online mediums to become members of ISIS and to become involved in militant activities abroad, such as in Syria and Indonesia (Hamidi, 2015).

Akhmetova and Muhammad Izzuddin (2020) identified religious extremism in Malaysia being the result of colonisation, politicisation of religion, the globalisation, as well as geopolitical events such as 9/11. Abdullah (1999) argued that religious extremism has detrimental impacts on national security, as it may disrupt the social cohesiveness of Malaysian society. In addition to this, religious extremism is seen as a delicate issue in Malaysia due to the sensitivity of the majority of the Muslim population, as religious extremism is often portrayed as being correlated with Islam due to the media highlights on Muslim terrorist groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and al-Qaeda. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is crucial to analyse the perception of Malaysian Muslims on the dimensions of religiosity. Studies in Malaysia have shown that Malaysians have tendencies to be sympathetic towards religious-based groups, despite them being branded as terrorist groups internationally. For example, research conducted by Pew Research Center in 2015 showed that 11% of Malaysian Muslims are sympathetic to ISIS, while research in 2017 conducted by a Malaysian think tank focusing on terrorism and extremism, IMAN, showed that 10% of Malaysian youths feel that violent extremism is justified (IMAN Research, 2019).

While most discussions on religious extremism in Malaysia are centred on the security and geopolitical threats posed by radicalised and extremist individuals and groups (Fauzi, 2005; Rahimullah et al., 2013; Mazlan et al., 2017; Aslam & Gunaratna, 2019), there is little known about the public perception on elements of religious extremism in their daily religious routines and practices. A better understanding of public perception can provide information about areas that can be considered critical in that they need to be addressed so as to mitigate the negative effects of religious extremism and to enable authorities to identify the necessary mitigating preventative factors that can be employed to prevent public tendencies towards religious extremism from turning into religious violence.

This study identifies four elements of religiosity in analysing the perceptions of Malaysian Muslims of religious extremism, which are: (1) physical (Newman & Graham, 2018), (2) social (Newman & Graham, 2018; Vitorino et al., 2018), (3) cognitive (Saleem & Saleem, 2017; Idris et al., 2019), and (4) spiritual (Vitorino et al., 2018; Villani et al., 2019). The physical element refers to physical activities in manifesting

religious rituals and practices, such as praying and going for pilgrimage. The social element refers to the responsibilities of individuals to implement the religious teachings or specific laws subscribed to the religion within the society, which, for this study, refers to Islam. For mental well-being (i.e., the cognitive element), this study measured the perception of respondents of their view and feelings towards the adherence of religious teachings and the appraisal of several aspects outlined by religion, such as in the reference to the term *"jihād".* [1] The term *jihād* has especially become a much disputed term, as it has been utilised by terrorist and religious extremist groups to justify their violent actions that, whereas scholars focused on Islamic studies have shown that *jihād* is a dynamic concept, which is multi-layered and complex, ranging from a self-struggle for betterment to the rights in defending oneself and their community from external threats and aggression (Esposito, 2015; Arya, 2017). Lastly, the spiritual element measures what is weighed as significant in fulfilling the spiritual happiness of subjects, such as their views on their faith, the faith of others, and the effects of faith on one's life.

Methodology

Data Collection Measures

This study was designed to assess Malaysian Muslims' perspectives on the four elements of religiosity (as discussed above) covering the implementation of Islamic law/state, their sense of identity as a Muslim in a multicultural society, and their religious concerns such as the definition of a practicing Muslim. The data was collected through paper-based questionnaires administered to 500 Malaysian Muslims in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, in 2019. The survey was only conducted in the Malay language, as it is both the national language and the mother tongue of Malay Muslims in Malaysia. The findings of the survey were translated into English for publication purposes, which consisted of a series of close-ended questions covering the four main constructs of religiosity (i.e., the physical, social, spiritual, and cognitive elements). This research utilised the convenience sampling

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[1] For further reading on *jihad*, the authors recommend Rane (2009): Reconstructing Jihad amid Competing International Norms (2009, Palgrave Macmillan).

method based on a set criteria required for the respondents, as follows:
(1) Ethnic background as Malay, (2) Muslim, and (3) 18 years old and
above. The responses to closed items were measured using a 5-point
Likert Scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.
Kuala Lumpur was selected as the main site for data collection due
to the diverse origin of its dwellers that come from various parts of
Malaysia. Of the 500 responses received, three responses were excluded
because of missing data. Data collection was physically administered
by enumerators of the survey and was distributed among respondents
that met the requirements stated above. As mentioned, the location
of the survey was Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia and the
place of the melting pot, where Malaysians from various regions are
concentrated mainly for economic purposes. The minimum response
rate for the paper surveys of respondents, which exceeded 500, was set
at 65%. The response rate for this survey was 99.4%, which is above
the acceptable response rate percentage as suggested by Nutty (2008).

Ethical Considerations

As this survey was conducted anonymously and does not have any
implications on the respondents, ethical approval by the university's
Research Ethics Committee was deemed unnecessary. However, the
researchers took the necessary steps to ensure that all data collected
were anonymous and that the nature and objective of the survey was
clearly stated in the information sheet provided to the respondents.
Apart from this, the enumerators were also required to obtain consent
from the respondents before proceeding to collect the data. It was clearly
stated in the information sheet that the respondents could withdraw
from the survey at any time without any consequences. The information
sheet also explained that the survey was voluntary and anonymous in
nature, and that the data collected would only be used for academic
purposes such as reporting in published format. The respondents were
also assured that only aggregated data would be presented in any form
of publication.

Results

Demographic Data

The final sample included 497 Malay Muslims with 286 females
(57.5%) and 211 males (42.5%). Among the respondents, 496 of them

are Malaysian citizens (99.8%), while only one was a non-citizen Muslim (0.2%). As mentioned earlier that Kuala Lumpur is the capital city with its population coming from different parts of Malaysia, the study categorised respondents' geographical origin into five main regions in Malaysia: (1) West (Perak, Selangor, and Kuala Lumpur), (2) south (Negeri Sembilan, Johor, and Melaka), (3) east (Pahang, Kelantan, and Terengganu), (4) north (Perlis, Penang, Kedah, and Perak), and (5) Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak). From the 497 respondents, 297 were from the west coast (55.5%), 99 respondents were from the southern region (19.9%), 65 were originally from the east coast (13.1%), 46 were from the northern region (9.3%), and 11 were from Borneo (2.2.%). Table 1 below shows the breakdown of the demographic details of the survey's respondents.

Table 1. Demographics of the survey respondents.

Demographics	Survey Respondents
Gender	
Male	211 (42.5%)
Female	286 (57.5%)
Marital status	
Married	240 (48.3%)
Single	249 (50.1%)
Divorced	8 (1.6%)
Age	
18–25	93 (18.7%)
26–35	229 (46.1%)
36–45	106 (21.3%)
46–55	56 (11.3%)
56–60	9 (1.8%)
Above 60	4 (0.8%)
Profession	
Student	50 (10.1%)
Public sector	98 (19.7%)
Private sector	279 (56.1%)
Self-employed	34 (6.8%)
Unemployed	36 (7.2%)

Education level	
No formal education	4 (0.8%)
PMR (junior high school certificate)	10 (2%)
SPM (high school diploma	151 (30.4%)
Diploma and equivalent	126 (25.4%)
Bachelor's Degree	107 (21.5%)
Master's Degree	98 (19.7%)
PhD	1 (0.2%)
Income	
No income	80 (16.1%)
Low income	134 (27%)
Middle income	255 (51.3%)
Mid-to-high income	28 (5.6%)

In terms of marital status, 240 respondents were married (48.3%), 249 were single (50.1), and eight were divorced (1.6%). As for the age distribution, 93 respondents belonged to the 18–25-year-old category (18.7%), 229 to the 26–35-year-old category (46.1%), 106 to the 36–45-year-old category (21.3%), 56 to the 46–55 year old category (11.3%), nine to the 56–60-year-old category (1.8%), and four respondents to the above 60-year-old category (0.8%), which was the smallest age group in this study. The largest age group in this study was the 26–35-year-old category, followed by the 36–45-year-old category.

As for the profession of the respondents, private sector employees made up the highest percentage of respondents with 56.1% (279 respondents), while the second highest was civil servants with 19.7% (98 respondents), followed by students with 10.1% (50 respondents), unemployed with 7.2% (36 respondents), with self-employed being the smallest group with 6.8% (34 respondents). In terms of the formal education received by the respondents, the response rate from respondents who completed a high school diploma equivalent or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education) made up the largest proportion with 151 respondents (30.4%), followed by a diploma or equivalent with 126 respondents (25.4%), a Bachelor's with 107 respondents (21.5%), a postgraduate degrees (PhD and Master's) with 99 respondents (19.9%), and middle school with 10 respondents (2%), while four respondents did not have formal education (0.8%). In terms

of income distribution, 255 respondents belonged to the middle income group (51.3%); the second largest group of respondents belonged to the low income group with 134 respondents (27%), while 80 respondents had no independent source of income (16.1%) and 28 respondents recorded their income as high mid-to-high and above (5.6%). The majority of the Malaysian Muslims identified as *Ahli Sunnah Wa Al-Jamā'ah* as it is the only sect of Islam officially recognised by the government.

A pilot test was conducted with a total of 50 respondents residing in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, prior to the distribution of the survey to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaires. To measure the reliability of the items used in the questionnaires, Cronbach's alpha (α) was used as an indicator of the reliability of the pilot test. According to Ralf et al. (2015), a Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 or 0.6 is acceptable; a higher score closer to 1 is considered excellent (Taber, 2018). Table 2 indicates a Cronbach's alpha for the perception of religiosity with physical well-being of $\alpha = 0.700$. In relation to social well-being, Table 2 shows that, initially, Cronbach's alpha was below the result considered reliable, with a score of $\alpha = 0.511$. In order to increase the reliability result, item no. 5 with the lowest standard deviation with a score of -1.88 was deleted. As shown in Table 2 the reliability statistics for social well-being increased to the required score to be considered as acceptable, i.e., $\alpha = 0.783$. Table 2 shows the reliability test on mental well-being, with an initial Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.846$. Accordingly, this indicates that the items used were reliable. As shown in Table 2 the Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = 0.834$ for spiritual well-being; according to Ralf et al. (2015), this is beyond the acceptable value needed to validate the items.

Table 2. Reliability of the test.

Construct	Item	Pilot Test Cronbach's Alpha Score	Revised Cronbach's Alpha Score
B (Physical)	10	0.700	-
C (Social)	16	0.511	0.783
D (Mental)	9	0.846	-
E (Spiritual)	12	0.834	-

Perception of Religiosity in the Physical Dimension

In order to measure the perceptions of religiosity in the physical dimension, the subscales evaluated the subjects' perceptions of the frequency of their physical routines, as well as individuals' physical appearance during religious practices and rituals. For instance, the subject's personal perception towards one's physical religious activities and worldly needs and the cognisance of religiosity based on something physical-in-nature were measured. The items for this particular construct were developed to understand the level of the respondents' individual perceptions of religious extremism in physical religious practices in pursuit of attaining blessings of God. The items were constructed with the insertion of the elements of extremism in order to examine the level of extreme understanding of religion and in physical religious activities.

Table 3 describes the respondents' attitude towards the perception of extreme religiosity in the physical routine dimension. Overall, the results show that the majority of the respondents demonstrated an inclination towards extreme religiosity in their physical religious activities, especially in regard to religious rituals such as prayers, dress code as Muslims, and physical violence for religious purposes. For instance, the majority of the respondents agreed on the obligation as a Muslim to perform as many religious rituals as they could: 48.7% of the respondents agreed, while 21.8% disagreed. As prayers are regarded as one of the most important elements of Muslim religious rituals (obligatory prayers five times a day at specified times), most respondents (49.5%) agreed that missing obligatory prayers lead Muslims into becoming disbelievers, or *kāfir*, while 29.8% of the respondents disagreed (29.8%) and 20.7% were unsure. However, strong sentiments towards performing prayers as an indicator of one's level of religiosity were not similarly observed in the percentage of respondents, agreeing that they should perform more recommended and obligatory prayers (37.1%), as the majority of the respondents were unsure (43.3%).

Table 3. Physical dimension of religiosity.

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
Additional religious activities are advantageous	48.7	21.8	29.6

Missing an obligatory prayer makes a Muslim *kāfir* (a disbeliever)	49.5	29.8	20.7
Physical attire represents one's level of religiosity	43.8	26.4	29.8
Abjuration from worldly needs is necessary for me to be a religious individual	24.9	40.3	34.8
I am willing to be involved in a physical fight for the sake of religion, such as to be involved in *jihād*	41.3	25.5	33.2
I am willing to be involved in war against non-Muslims	45.1	18.7	36.2
Muslim women should not follow modern fashion trends	41.3	30.1	28.6
The more prayers I perform, the more religious I will be	37.1	19.7	43.3
Fashion trends are an innovation in religion	45.3	28.8	26.0
I should only follow one religious school of thought (*madhhab*)	24.6	40.0	35.4

Similarly, most respondents showed negative reactions to the statement on the requirement of abstinence of worldly matters in the pursuit of religious excellence, as 40.3% of respondents disagreed with this statement and only 24.9% agreed. A comparable pattern was observed in the need to have a homogeneous Islamic school of thought in order to conduct religious activities, as 40% of the respondents disagreed, while only 24.6% of respondents agreed.

This study found that respondents also have a clear stance when it comes to physical appearance or dress code: 43.8% agreed that one's attire represents an individual's level of religiosity, while only 26.4% of the respondents disagreed. However, the opinions were quite divided when it comes to female Muslim women's choices of attire, as 41.3% agreed that Muslim women should not follow modern fashion trends, while 30.1% disagreed. Similar patterns of responses were observed in their opinions towards fashion trends: 28.8% of the respondents disagreed that fashion trends are not in line with religious teachings, while 45.3% agreed. This shows that physical appearance through the

choice of dress code and attire is seen as quite an important indicator of
one's level of religiosity.

This study discovered that the respondents were divided when it
comes to physical aggression in protecting one's faith: 41.3% of the
respondents agreed that they are willing to be involved in physical fights
for the sake of religion, while 25.5% disagreed; however, a significant
percentage of respondents were unclear of their stance on this issue,
as 33.2% chose a neutral position. Equivalent responses were also
recorded for the question on the willingness to be involved in war with
non-Muslims, as 45.1% stated their readiness to be involved in war with
non-believers, 18.7% disagreed, and 36.2% were unsure.

Perception of Religiosity in the Social Dimension

In the second construct, the perception of religiosity with societal
well-being, the subscales measured the perception of religiosity as an
individual within a community, such as in the case of the responsibility
to implement the teachings or a specific law as subscribed to the religion.
The items were constructed in order to understand the attitudes and
perceptions toward religiosity by looking at the subjects' perceptions of
religion and religiosity, regarding the subjects' personal social lives as
an individual and also as a part of society from their own point of view.

Table 4 illustrates the perception of the social dimension of extreme
religiosity. This study found that the respondents did not favour extreme
religiosity if it involves societal well-being. However, respondents
strongly favoured issues related to Sharī'ah law and superiority
as Muslims. It was found that an overwhelming percentage of the
respondents had a preference towards the implementation of Sharī'ah
law in Malaysia, as they view it as a religious obligation (83.5%), and
only 4% disagreed. Furthermore, 67.7% also agreed that non-Muslims
in Malaysia should accept the implementation of Sharī'ah law if it is
passed by Parliament, while only 11% disagreed; however, 21.3% of the
respondents chose a neutral position regarding this issue.

Table 4. Social dimension of religiosity.

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
Having only one standard for religious practices is good for society	26.1	26.4	47.5

Every Muslim should only follow only one *madhhab/*religious school of thought	25.5	39.3	35.2
Using Arabic terms is the best way to show one's level of religiosity in society	17.9	53.1	29.0
The ban of other Islamic sects is necessary to preserve religious harmony in society	21.1	36.9	42.0
Implementation of Sharī'ah law is a societal obligation	83.5	1.4	15.1
Being a Muslim elevates my social status	78.9	4.0	17.1
Non-Muslims should accept the implementation of Sharī'ah law in Malaysia	67.7	11.0	21.3
To obtain a peaceful society, it is important that all members of society belong to the same religious group	22.3	48.7	29.0
Government has the power to force an individual to practice religion	25.3	41.5	33.2
I believe that only Muslims face discrimination	33.6	30.0	40.4
Non-Muslims should keep practicing their religions in private	21.5	44.7	33.8
Practices of other religions are disturbing	5.2	70.6	24.1
I only trust Muslims	15.0	46.2	38.6
Non-Muslims want to defeat Muslims	50.9	9.2	39.8
Religion promotes positive relationships with people of the same religion only	33.6	45.6	20.7
People of other faiths disturb the peace of Muslims	9.4	69.2	21.3

This is in tandem with the responses gathered on the superiority of Muslims in Malaysia in comparison to non-Muslims. Of the respondents, 78.9% agreed that being a Muslim elevates their social status. However, they disagreed that the use of Arabic terms in Malaysian society is a good indicator of religiosity (53.1%), as only 17.9% agreed with this statement. They also disagreed that banning other Islamic sects such as Shi'a is justifiable (36.1%), as only 21.1% agreed. Moreover, they were not in favour of strict government controls over individuals' religious practices, as 41.5% of the respondents disagreed with this statement and only 25.3% agreed.

In general, the Malaysian Muslims were unsure of the need to have standardised religious practices in society: 47.5% chose a neutral

position on the statement, while 26.1% agreed and 26.4% disagreed. They also chose a neutral position regarding the utilisation of only one Islamic school of thought in society, as 35.2% chose a neutral position, while 39.3% disagreed with this statement. Meanwhile, 25.5% of the respondents agreed that having a homogenous Islamic school of thought in society is desirable. Despite this, the respondents showed acceptance towards the diversity of religion, as 48.7% disagreed that only having Muslims in Malaysia would lead to a peaceful community, while 22.3% agreed with this statement.

The sentiments of the Malaysian Muslims towards non-Muslims were also generally positive. However, there is a strong sentiment that non-Muslims want to defeat Muslims, as 50.9% of the respondents agreed with this statement, 39.8% remained neutral, and only 9.2% disagreed. As regards to discrimination, the respondents also believed that being a Muslim subjects them to discrimination, as 33.6% agreed with this statement and 30% disagreed; another 40.4% were unsure and chose a neutral position. Nevertheless, only 5.2% of the respondents found the practices of other religions cumbersome, while 70.6% disagreed with this statement. They also believed that non-Muslims should be allowed to practice their religion openly, as 44.7% disagreed that non-Muslims should confine their religious practices to a private place, while 21.5% agreed with this statement. A compelling percentage of respondents did not believe that people of other faiths disturb Muslims in Malaysia, as 69.2% disagreed with this statement, while only 9.4% agreed.

This study found that while the Malaysian Muslims were comfortable co-existing with non-Muslims, they were also insecure about their position. They had very strong opinions towards the superiority of Muslims, which was translated into their strong support for the implementation of Sharī'ah law, as well as the sentiments that Muslims are being side-lined due to their religious beliefs.

Perception of Religiosity in the Cognitive Dimension

The instrumentation of the third construct relied on the subscales of the measurements of the subjects' perceptions of the cognitive dimension of the individual's religiosity. It focused on the view of the values of religion and the thoughts towards the adherence of religious teachings. Bender and Beller (2013) defined cognition as "mental states of all

kinds, which are generated and altered by way of information input, processing, storage, and transmission" (p. 43).

Table 5 specifies the perceptions of religiosity of the respondents in the cognitive dimension. According to this table, the majority of respondents perceived that strict adherence to religious teachings makes them feel superior as individuals. Table 5 also shows that the majority agreed that strict adherence to religious practices makes them happy and that they feel special above the others, such as moderately practicing Muslims and non-Muslims, with 75.3% of the respondents agreed to the statement, while only 5% disagreed. In addition, 52.1% agreed that meticulously following religious teachings leads to the creation of superior feelings. However, it is interesting to note that when it comes to the positive reinforcement of strict religious practices, only 29.3% opined that it leads to happiness, while 31.1% disagreed and 29.6% chose to be neutral.

Table 5. Cognitive dimension of religiosity.

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
Islam is the only right religion	85.9	7.2	6.8
I cannot compromise on differences in religious practices	13.7	65.4	20.9
Strict adherence to religious practices makes me a superior individual	52.1	18.7	29.2
Strict adherence to religious practices makes me feel special	75.3	5.0	19.7
Strict adherence to religious practices creates happiness in me	29.3	31.1	29.6
I cannot tolerate other religious thoughts that differ from mine	32.0	43.5	24.5
Only Islam has noble values	73.2	8.2	18.5
Only Islam can provide the truth	34.9	24.5	40.6
I believe that *jihād* by using arms and weapons is the noblest form of effort to uphold my religion	48.5	9.6	41.9

Following religious teachings as it is first introduced will make me a true Muslim	41.3	24.5	34.2

An inconsistent pattern was noticed in terms of the respondents' perceptions of the value of religion. While 73.2% of the respondents agreed that Islam is the only religion with noble values, 8.2% disagreed, and less than half of the respondents agreed that only their religion is considered as providing the ultimate truth (34.9%), as the majority chose a neutral position (41.9%) and 9.6% disagreed. However, the vast majority of the respondents agreed that Islam is the only right religion (85.9%), while only 7.2% indicated their disagreement with this statement.

The level of flexibility in terms of religious values also varied: 43.5% of the respondents agreed that they cannot tolerate different ways of thinking in matters related to religious practices, while 31.9% disagreed. A high percentage of the respondents also perceived a military style of religious struggle or *jihād* by using weaponry as the noblest *jihād* (48.5%), while only 9.6% disagreed. In addition, the respondents also implied that only by following the orthodox Islamic teachings can an individual to be considered a true Muslim (41.3%), while 24.5% disagreed with this statement.

Perception of Religiosity in the Spiritual Dimension

The last construct, which is the perception of religiosity with spiritual well-being, the subscales measured what was weighted as significant in fulfilling the spiritual well-being of the subjects. Puchalski et al. (2009) defined spirituality as "the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred" (p. 887).

Table 6 illustrates that the Malaysian Muslims favoured the exclusivity of Islam, as 61.6% agreed that they are practicing the right version of Islam, while only 17.3% disagreed. Moreover, 51.1% agreed that having a higher level of religious knowledge elevates one's status, and only 25.6% disagreed with this statement. A similar pattern was also observed when it comes to the type of legal system accepted by the Malaysian Muslims. The majority of the respondents believed that Islamic law is the valid law to be followed (75.3%), and that Sharī'ah

law is the best form of law as it protects their spirituality (76.3%), with only 7% and 2.6% disagreed with these statements, respectively.

Table 6. Spiritual dimension of religiosity.

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
My version of Islam is the only correct version	61.6	17.3	21.1
People of other faiths will go to hell	45.8	28.0	26.2
Having more religious knowledge makes me a better individual than others	51.1	25.6	23.3
I follow the literal meanings of the Quran and Hadith only	24.3	28.2	47.5
Islamic law is the law that should be followed by Muslims	75.3	7.0	17.7
I will receive God's blessing only if I strictly adhere to Islamic practices	58.6	14.7	26.8
Sinners should be punished	57.1	15.9	27.0
Muslims should have a good relationship with non-Muslims	73.1	7.0	19.9
I believe that the implementation of Sharī'ah law is good to protect my spirituality	76.3	2.6	21.1
I only believe in some specific religious groups	22.1	35.3	42.7
I adhere strictly to my religious teachings to nourish my soul	72.5	5.2	22.3
I believe the "fist against fist" principle is fair when it involves religious matters	20.3	57.7	21.9

In terms of religiosity in fulfilling spiritual needs, 72.5% of the respondents categorised themselves as strict followers of Islamic practices, as 58.6% believed that strict adherence to religious teachings is a requirement to obtain God's blessings. However, only 24.3% of the respondents perceived that they are following the literal meaning of the two main sources of Islamic teachings, namely, the Quran, Islam's Holy Book, and the Hadith, the record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as the majority of respondents (47.5%)

chose neutral response. A high percentage of the respondents also
believed that wrongful doers will and should be punished for their sins
(57.1%), which reflect a strong stance on those who are perceived as
deviants of religious norms and practices.

Despite this, the Malaysian Muslims also believed in co-existence as
a means to achieve spiritual well-being. The majority of the respondents
agreed that maintaining good relationships with people of different
faiths are necessary (73.1%), while only 7% disagreed. In addition, only
22.1% stated that they only have trust for people in specific religious
groups, which indicates that having different faiths is not an obstacle
for Malaysian Muslims to co-exist. Furthermore, 57.7% disagreed that
wrong doings should be repaid in the same manner, while only 20.3%
agreed to the statement.

Discussion

In recent years, the discussion on the correlation between religion
and violent extremism has garnered the interest of the public, the
government, and scholars alike. However, a study by Rane et al. (2020)
on Australian Muslims showed that the image of Muslims on media and
political discourse does not tally with the experiences and realities of
Australian Muslims as experienced by themselves. Therefore, this study
sought to understand Malaysian Muslims' perceptions on religiosity
and to expand the discussion on religious extremism to include the
general public in a multicultural society such as Malaysia. This study
illuminated the extent to which the perceptions of the majority ethnic
and religious group in Malaysia, the Malay Muslims, on religiosity and
to which level religious extremist tendencies have been embraced by
the public consciousness.

This study found that across the four domains of religiosity, the
general public displayed tendencies towards religious extremism
in similar areas, such as exclusivity and superiority, inflexibility
towards differences, and suspiciousness towards the intention of non-
believers. However, the Malaysian Muslims also showed support for
the co-existence with and tolerance for non-believers. The paradox of
contrasting perspectives needs to be explored further. Schmid (2014)
used indicators to monitor extremism, which included subordination
of individual freedoms to collective goals, exhibition of intolerance
to all views other than their own dogmatic one, rejection of diversity

and pluralism, and active endorsement of the use of violence to fight evil (p. 21), showing that they may not translate well in understanding the complex relationship of Malay Muslims have with their religious identity and others. This study found that the Malaysian Muslims seemed to be in a paradox, in which, although they favoured exclusivity and superiority of being the majority, they also rejected violent means of punishment or the banning of non-Muslims from public religious rituals. Despite having a positive perception towards the use of militancy for the purpose of *jihād* and waging war on non-Muslims, they rejected the notion of homogeneity in terms of faith groups and embraced the idea of a multi-religious society. This suggests that Malay Muslims in Malaysia are driven by fear of others (non-believers) in their approach towards the role of religion in society. The findings of the survey are in line with other scholars' analysis of the Malaysian society's complex relationship with religion, as religious identity is often intertwined with other forms of political identities, such as ethnicity and tribalism, and this leads to a rise in religious nationalism (Barr & Govindasamy, 2010; Nishi, 2020). Harding (2012) stated that despite Malaysian society not being immune to inter-religious conflict; it rarely translates into violence or aggressive encounters, except for isolated incidents that are swiftly handled by the authorities.

The strong support of the Malay Muslims for the implementation of Sharī'ah law across the four domains indicates that the Malay Muslims were more focused on the visible aspects of extreme religiosity, such as physical appearance and physical rituals, that can be managed and administered through the establishment of a legal institution and can reinforce their status quo as the majority group in society, rather than intangible aspects of extreme religiosity, such as cognitive and spiritual aspects. The complex relationship of Malay Muslims with their religious identity in the legal system has been well studied by scholars, as Malaysia is constitutionally defined as a secular country with a majority Muslim population and the existence of a dual court structure (civil and Sharī'ah courts), and in its legal apparatus creates, at times, conflicts due to the limited power of the Sharī'ah courts over civil matters (Whiting, 2010; Tew, 2011; Harding, 2012; Neoh, 2014)

This paper demonstrated the potential for religious groups, government organisations, and civil society interventions to identify the crucial dimensions of religiosity in mitigating extremism among the

common Malaysian public. This study proposes that the reconciliation of religious and ethnic identity issues among different groups through interfaith dialogues, for example, may be utilised to reduce the fear of "others" among Malay Muslims. Nonetheless, we recognise the limitation of this study, as it only presents descriptive statistical analysis, as well as the limited nature of our variables and the sampling population. Future research may benefit from the analysis of this study in identifying and recognising the general public's tendencies towards religious extremism in society. We also would like to highlight that despite the limitations, this study contributes to the growing literature on religious extremism, especially in a multicultural society in which there is growing tension between the majority and minority groups, particularly if the gap between the minority and majority groups is not wide. In addition to this, this study also assists the development of interdisciplinary approaches in investigating religious extremism by including statistical analysis of the public perception on religious extremism, as studies on religious extremism in a Malaysian setting are often focused on specific groups of people who are directly involved in or associate themselves with extremist and radical groups and usually utilise qualitative techniques. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a more insightful understanding of the worldview of Malaysian Muslims' understanding of the role of religion and its place in a multicultural society.

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