

## **Non-Muslim Views about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia: An Empirical Study**

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**Abstract:** Based upon sample survey and interviews, this study attempts to find out the views of Malaysian non-Muslims about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. Such a study is warranted because of the plural nature of Malaysian society whose stability depends upon harmonious relations between various ethnic and religious groups. The survey sample is composed of various educated segments, professionals and university students. The study found that majority of non-Muslims hold positive opinion about their counterpart in Malaysia which augurs well for the stability of the country. Nevertheless, there exists a good number of people holding a negative opinion about Islam and Muslims implying, therefore, the need for more concerted efforts about improving the image of Islam and Muslims in Malaysia.

Malaysia is a multicultural society, with Malays, Chinese and Indians living side by side in peace.<sup>1</sup> As of November 2006, Malaysia has a population of 26,856,585. The Malays, Muslims by constitutional definition, are the largest community, comprising about 60 percent of the population of Peninsular Malaysia. They are called *Bumiputra* (sons of the soil). If we add Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysia's Borneo states, the indigenous peoples make up 62 percent of the population. This plural condition was formed through British immigration policies during colonial rule, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to 1957, when independence was granted,<sup>2</sup> and it was concretized in an ethnic division of labour with Malays in state bureaucracy and

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agriculture, Chinese in commerce and tin mines, and Indians in plantations.<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese comprise about a quarter of the population. Most of them confess to one or more of the three great religions of Mainland China – Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism and speak Hokkien, Hakka, and Cantonese. Malaysians of Indian descent, mainly Hindu Tamils, comprise about 7 percent of the population. Eurasians and indigenous tribes make up the remaining population. Bahasa Melayu is the official language of the country but English is widely spoken. Some Malaysian scholars stress a class-based analysis of Malaysian society; it seems fairer to say that ethnicity and class interact in subtle and evolving ways within the Malaysian society.<sup>4</sup>

Malaysia is generally accepted by political scientists and sociologists as a “divided society.” This concept posits profound and persistent cleavages within Malaysian society among various ethnic groups. However, contrary to expectations, Malaysia is widely accepted as a country which has been remarkably, and perhaps uniquely, successful in regulating ethnic conflict and maintaining racial harmony in a post-colonial context. The political system, a federation of 13 states and 3 federal territories, is based upon a “power sharing” formula whereby the ethnic communities form a grand coalition to rule and respect each other’s way of life. The durability of the system also requires a positive opinion about each other’s religion.<sup>5</sup>

This study explores Malaysian non-Muslims’ views about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. As stated, non-Muslims constitute about 40 percent of Malaysia’s population. Extreme misperceptions about majority Muslims faith and behaviour would have negative implications for inter-religious and inter-racial harmony which is the hallmark of the Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society. This, in turn, would have serious repercussions for the country’s developmental efforts.

### **Data Base**

This study is based upon data obtained through self-administered questionnaire, personal interviews and observations. Three thousand questionnaires were distributed to randomly selected respondents from the professionals and university students among non-Muslim

Chinese, Indians and other races in Federal Territory and some major districts in Selangor.<sup>6</sup> Only 624 duly filled questionnaires were collected giving a response rate of 20.8 percent. The questionnaire contained 21 items including religion, race, gender, occupation, marital status and organizational affiliation. It also contained several statements to tap the Malaysian non-Muslims' opinion about Islam as a way of life, Islamic books, and Muslim behaviour. Each statement gave respondents five (5) options (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and no comment) to choose from. In addition to the questionnaire, unstructured interviews were conducted with 30 respondents. The interview sessions were much more encouraging as the institutions run by non-Muslims extended their fullest cooperation and provided free and frank opinion about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia.

### **Sample Profile**

The questionnaire was distributed to a stratified sample of 77 percent Chinese, 18 percent Indians and 5 percent others. The sample of 624 is composed of 47 percent male and 53 percent female. They are all professionals teaching in Universities, practising law, working as administrators, medical doctors and engineers. Their age group varies between 25 and 40. In terms of religion, a majority of them (43 percent) declared that they adhere to Buddhism, followed by 22 percent Christians, 11 percent Hindus and 5 percent others. Their knowledge of Islam is commendable in that about 41 percent of them have read at least one book on Islam. Almost the same percentage of respondents came to know about Islam through conversation with friends and the rest preferred not to respond to this item. The following section discusses their responses to the questions relating to Islam, Islamic books, and Muslim behaviour in Malaysia.

### **Image of Islam**

Islam is not a religion in the conventional sense confining itself to rites and rituals but a complete and comprehensive way of life covering all fields of human existence and providing guidance in all aspects of life. Islam is the religion of truth and the embodiment of the code of life which God has revealed for the guidance of

mankind. It is a religion of moderation and peace, and scorns extremism, violence and militancy. It promotes righteousness and virtue, and stands for protection of human rights based on egalitarianism. It is not antagonistic to knowledge, science and development; rather, it makes seeking knowledge obligatory upon all Muslims.

Yet, Islam is most misunderstood and much maligned. Muslims are labeled as fundamentalists, militants, extremists and terrorists and Islam is portrayed as the religion of the sword.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, “the American administration is asking Muslim countries to look into the curriculum of the Qur’ānic schools, which according to them are producing terrorists.”<sup>8</sup> Some Zionist-influenced US newspapers may report, in a couple of bald sentences, the aerial blasting of Arab civilian homes and their children in Gaza by Israeli US built F-16s but an Arab ‘suicide bombers’ attack receive front page press coverage “with grisly photographs, offering justification for Israeli barbarities on the Palestinian Arabs.”<sup>9</sup> In relations between the West and the Muslim world, phrases like a clash of civilizations or a clash of cultures recur as does the charge that Islam is incompatible with democracy or that it is a particularly militant religion.

It has been argued that a considerable number of non-Muslims are not well acquainted with other religions, including Islam. It seems that they have very little or almost no access to genuine Islamic literature and hence their knowledge of Islam is mostly based on the media. Massive literature produced by some non-Muslim writers on Islam is misleading and sometimes appears to be designed to demonize Islam. This propaganda seems to have created a huge gap between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to some observations, non-Muslims living in Malaysia are also not well acquainted with Islam and Muslims and hence succumb to anti-Islam propaganda. How true are such perceptions about non-Muslim Malaysians?

Islam, Muslims believe, is a religion of peace with the believers living with other communities without much problem.<sup>8</sup> No other civilisation in history has demonstrated a more resolute commitment to pluralism than Islam. It is rational and pragmatic and promotes knowledge, science and development. It makes seeking of

knowledge obligatory upon all Muslim males and females. To assess non-Muslim views about Islam in general, the questionnaire contained 6 statements on Islam and the respondents were required to choose from among five Likert scale responses: strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree and no comment. For ease of analysis, strongly agree and agree responses were collapsed into one category “agree” and strongly disagree and disagree were collapsed into one category “disagree” giving three columns as shown in table 1.

**Table 1:** Non-Muslim perceptions about Islam (in percentage)

Statements	Agree	Disagree	No Comment
Islam is a rational religion	53.9	21.5	24.6
Islam is a practical and pragmatic religion	49.3	20.3	30.4
Islam is a religion of progress & development	50.5	26.4	23.1
Islam obligates pursuit of science	37.9	23.9	38.2
Islam is a comprehensive way of life	30.7	30.8	38.5
Islam is a religion of tolerance	53.7	22.1	24.2

Source: Survey

Clearly, Islam is viewed positively by a majority of respondents. A little over 50 percent of respondents believe that Islam is a rational religion (54 percent), it is tolerant (54 percent), progressive and development oriented (51 percent), and that it is a practical and pragmatic religion (49 percent). One interview commented that “Islam is a religion which inspires its believers to do good things and prevent bad things, but most Muslims do not follow this obligation.” Another interviewee said:

Many people, including Muslims, are misconceiving Islam as a religion. The teachings of Islam are practical and beneficial to the society. It is the Muslim people who give wrong impression about Islam. When one learns about Islam from the right and authorised sources he or she can understand it better.

Many respondents also agreed that Islam makes it obligatory upon the believers to pursue science. However, the percentage of those who agreed with this statement dropped sharply to about 38 percent, still constituting a majority among those who responded to this item.

As to the statement that Islam is a complete, comprehensive way of life, only 31 percent agreed while almost an equal number of respondents (31 percent) disagreed. The explanation of such a low level perception came from an interviewee who suggested to “make a clear distinction between what Islam teaches (the actual teachings, faith) and how many Muslims practise it.” It implies that the respondents formed their views on these two statements on the basis of Muslim behaviour and practise rather than upon Islamic teachings. The negative responses to the six items, however, should not be discounted. These responses vary between 21 to 31 percent. Some respondents during the interview session even suggested that Muslims should rewrite the Qur’ān to suit the modern world.

The interesting thing to note in the table is the large percentages in the “no comment” column meaning that between 23 to 39 percent of the respondents refrained from giving any feedbacks on these statements. Their silence could mean that they have negative opinions about Islam but do not want to express it publicly. It could also mean that they are following the “golden rule” inherent in the “power sharing” formula practised in Malaysia of not commenting upon “sensitive” issues like the religion of others. Alternatively, these respondents have not made up their mind one way or the other. Irrespective of interpretations, the percentages in the “no comment” column suggest that Muslims have a lot to do in order to endear themselves to their non-Muslim counterparts in Malaysia.

### **Views on Islamic Literature**

Many Muslim organizations in Malaysia publish books, pamphlets and magazines to promote a better understanding about Islam and Muslims. Most of these books are in Bahasa Malaysia and English but some of these are available in other languages. Muslim organizations and government agencies believe that the resources are enough to help non-Muslims understand Islam better. What is the opinion of non-Muslims about published works on Islam? Do they have a positive opinion about these works and would they like these books to be introduced in schools and colleges to promote a better understanding of Islam? Table 2 summarizes the answers to the above questions. As in Table 1, the answers have been collapsed into three columns for ease of analysis.

**Table 2:** Non-Muslim views about Books on Islam (in percentage)

Statements	Agree	Disagree	No Comment
Islamic books could serve as a guide to establish peace in Malaysia	38.5	33.2	28.3
Islamic books are rational and intellectually stimulating	37.4	18.6	44.0
Islamic books should be prescribed for all particularly non-Muslims students	33.7	43.0	22.3
Islamic books portray militancy and fanaticism	20.4	37.8	41.7
Islamic books promote religious tolerance	40.4	19.4	40.2

Source: Survey

Once again, a majority of the responses is positive concerning Islamic works published in Malaysia. The responses to three statements eliciting their opinion about Islamic literature show a remarkable consistency. About 39 percent of the respondents believe that Islamic books could help build a peaceful and prosperous Malaysia, while 37 percent agree that Islamic books are rational and intellectually stimulating and about 40 percent believe that they promote religious tolerance. One of the items in the table is negatively worded saying that Islamic works portray militancy and fanaticism. A majority of 38 percent disagreed with this statement and thus is consistent with the responses to positively-worded other statements.

To portray the significance of the positive responses to items in Table 2, it is necessary to point out that the questionnaire contained an item enquiring about the number of books or articles the respondents have read on Islam. Only 41 percent of our respondents have read one or more than one works on Islam. The positive responses of about 38 percent to the items in Table 2 were from those who are familiar with the literature on Islam. The implication of this finding is that literature plays a significant role in creating a positive image of Islam among non-Muslims.

The positive responses should, however, be juxtaposed along with the responses in the “disagree” column to get a clearer picture. The disagreement with the statements depicting Islamic books being rational and non-militant is 19 and 20 percent, respectively. However,

33 percent believes that Islamic books do not promote peace in the society. This implies that most Islamic books are worth reading but they do not emphasise peace as a value. Likewise, while the majority of the respondents are positive about Islamic books, only 34 percent agreed that Islamic books should be prescribed to non-Muslim students in the institutions of higher learning for a correct understanding of Islam. About 43 percent disagreed with this statement. Only 18 percent of these respondents disagreed with this statement strongly. One interviewee reacted to this question by commenting that “Muslims wish others to understand Islam but they are not prepared to understand other’s religions.” It is to be noted that the percent of “no comment” response for this particular statement dropped sharply to about 22 percent. This implies that on the issue of introducing Islamic books to non-Muslims in higher institutions, the respondents voiced their explicit disapprovals.

On other statements concerning Islamic books, the “no comment” response vary between 28 and a high of 44 percent. The fact that about 59 percent of non-Muslims have never read any book about Islam explains the large percentages in the “no comment” column.

### **Image of Muslims in Malaysia**

A Muslim is defined as someone who professes faith in Islam. To profess faith is one thing, to lead an Islamic way of life is another. Muslims have not always lived according to the tenets of Islam. Non-Muslims, however, look at deviant behaviours of Muslims and demonise Islam. Those who adhere to the fundamental principles of Islam are pejoratively labelled as fundamentalists. The events of September 11, 2001, which is blamed entirely upon Muslims, have added insult to injury. The Western Media is tirelessly propagating the idea of Muslims being terrorists, violent-prone, and fundamentalists. What is the opinion of non-Muslims in Malaysia about their Muslim counterparts? Table 3 provides some answers to this question. The table contains seven statements and the respective responses, in percentages, are collapsed into three categories.

Evidently, the positive responses far outweigh the negative ones. Of special note are the statements branding Muslims as non-cooperative and militants. A solid majority of 63 percent and 52 percent of the non-Muslims rejected such characterisations of



**Table 3:** Image of Muslims in the eyes of Malaysian non-Muslims (in percentage)

Statements	Agree	Disagree	No Comment
Muslims are narrow minded	34.8	41.9	23.3
Muslims are extremists	24.4	47.1	28.5
Muslims are non-cooperative	14.1	63.1	22.8
Muslims are militants	15.5	52.0	32.5
Muslims are suspicious of others	23.0	47.7	29.3
Muslims compel others to join Islam	24.4	47.8	27.8
Muslims look down upon other religionists	24.5	45.8	29.7

Source: Survey

Muslims. There is a degree of consistency between the responses in Table 1 and Table 3. In Table 1, a majority of over 50 percent of respondents believe that Islam is a rational, tolerant, and a progressive religion. The adherents of Islam are likewise evaluated positively as shown in table 3. Interestingly, the positive evaluations of Muslims supercede those about Islam.

The percentages in the “no comment” column are also worth comparing. In Table 1, the high was 38 percent which shot to 44 percent in table 2. In Table 3, however, such responses dropped sharply to 30 percent. This is, perhaps, due to the fact that these statements are not very sensitive and hence respondents felt freer to comment.

The answers to the unstructured questions also showed a positive evaluation about Muslims. Some illustrations may be useful in this regard. A Hindu subject commented that “Muslims of Malaysia are kind and friendly.” A Chinese woman stated that she has been living in Malaysia for more than twenty-five years and feels very happy living here. She has “never felt inferior to communicate or deal with Muslims” and has many Muslim friends and they are friendly. Another Hindu woman said that she does not feel threatened living in a Muslim community and that she could perform her religious rites and rituals without any protest from Muslims. She thanks “the government for allowing non-Muslims to maintain their religious identities.” A Chinese interviewee said: “A good number of Muslims are lazy in Malaysia. They are dependent upon government subsidies.

They enjoy special treatment. It is very disappointing to others.” Some interviewees believe that Muslims are rapidly and gladly responding to modern and secular ways of living and taking less serious note of dating and free mixing of the sexes.

Between 14 to 35 percent of respondents have negative opinions about Muslims. The most pronounced (35 percent) is the view that Muslims are narrow-minded implying that Muslims are rigid and uncompromising in their religious practices and are not open to criticism against their religion. Many non-Muslim interviewees were of the opinion that Muslims are backward at all levels, especially in the economic sphere, because they are slow, lethargic and dependent upon others. An orthodox Hindu, a sales representative of a private company, said that he has been living with Muslims for over twenty five years. He observed that Muslims are good in praying, fasting and performing pilgrimage but “many practise double standards” in their dealings with others. Some are even “superstitious and often visit sorcerers and astrologers.”

### **Religion and the Positive Image of Islam**

The data presented in the preceding section suggest that a majority of non-Muslims have a positive image about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. What is the relationship, if any, between religious affiliation and positive opinion about Islam?

**Table 4:** Opinion About Islam and Muslims by Religion (in percentage)

Opinion About:	Christian	Buddhist	Hindu	Others
Islam	25.50	51.76	15.57	7.17
Islamic Literature	26.03	55.42	13.90	4.65
Malaysian Muslims	26.17	55.25	14.46	4.12

Source: Survey

As earlier stated, many of the respondents (43 percent) adhere to Buddhism, followed by 22 percent Christians, 11.1 percent Hindus, and 5 percent others. Cross tabulating religious affiliation with Islam (6 items), Islamic literature (5 items) and the behaviour of Muslims in Malaysia (7 items) yielded interesting results. Buddhists in our sample are consistently positive on all the items scoring 52, 55 and

55 percent, followed by Christians ranging between 25 to 26 percent and Hindus between 14 and 16 percent. This suggests a need, among others, for more efforts at explaining Islam to Christians and Hindus.

What accounts for a relatively high positive response of Buddhists vis-a-vis other religionists? The impression gained through friendly exchanges with colleagues specializing in comparative religion is that Buddhists do not claim any revealed absolute truth but they are enlightened and very accommodative, for as Buddha had said, “there is no need to change culture or even religions.” Anyone who found anything useful in Buddha’s teachings was welcome to partake of them.<sup>9</sup> Buddhism, like Islam, is well known for following the “middle way” with an emphasis on modesty and balance. In many respects, they are closer to Islam and hence they are appreciative of Islam. Fruitful dialogues are possible between the adherents of these two different religions.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Non-Muslims hold different opinions on many features of Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. The Malaysian non-Muslims are aware that Islam is a monotheistic religion. A majority ranging between 35 to 56 percent have a positive opinion about Islam and Muslims. These respondents are well educated and have good Muslim neighbours or have positive dealings with Muslims. They feel no threats to their religion and culture from the Muslim majority population. They do not feel constrained in performing their religious rites and rituals. These people probably are the pillars of stability in Malaysia.

One interesting phenomenon that emerged from this survey and also voiced out by interviewees is the positive image of Muslims held by non-Muslims. This is against the generally held view about Muslims in the West. Time and again, it has been said that Islam is a good religion but the Muslims are not following Islam in its true sense. This study, however, found that while Islam is considered by the majority to be good, a solid majority of 63 percent of the respondents considered Muslims to be cooperative and another 52 percent believed Muslims to be non-militant. One variable that may explain this is perhaps the Malay culture, but this needs to be further probed.

The study also found a good percentage of people who refrained from expressing their opinion on matters related to Islam and Muslims. These respondents perhaps belong to the category of people who abide by the principle of “non-interference” in sensitive matters as long as it does not affect their way of life. This is the principle of power-sharing among various ethnic groups which is practised in Malaysia and which gave the country its much admired quality of stability and peace. Given the absence of items in the questionnaire to tap this aspect of Malaysian people’s opinion, the conclusion has to be tentative. One indicator of the high probability of this interpretation is the majority’s disapproval to the suggestion of introducing Islamic books in higher institutions of learning particularly for non-Muslims. Thus, in matters affecting their way of life, they are willing to break their silence.

The study also found about one-fourth of the sample holding negative opinions about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. As revealed in interview sessions, some Malaysians believe that Islam downgrades non-Muslims and does not give equal rights to them. These responses suggest the need to formulate policies to solve inter-ethnic problems and to devise strategies to create a better understanding of Islamic worldview and develop inter-faith tolerance and respect among the citizens of Malaysia.

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## Notes

1. The authors are grateful to the Research Centre, International Islamic University Malaysia, for funding this research project.

2. “Federation of Malaya” gained independence from Britain in 1957. “Malaysia” came into existence in 1963 with the inclusion of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore. In 1965, Singapore seceded from Malaysia and formed an independent republic.

3. See Clive S. Kessler, “Archaism and Modernity: Contemporary Malay Political Culture,” in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah, eds., *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), 140-41.

4. See K.S. Jomo, *A Question of Class: Capital, the State and Uneven Development in Malaysia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986); Johan Saravanamuttu, *Industrialization and the Institutionalisation of Authoritarian*

*Regimes: The Consequences of NIC-dom in Malaysia and Singapore* (Yokohama: International Peace Research Institute Meigaku, Occasional Papers no. 8, 1991).

5. According to some scholars, Malaysia operates a consociational system. Arendt Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics*, 21, no. 2 (January 1969) defines "consociational democracy" in terms of four characteristics. The first and most important element is government by a grand coalition of political leaders of all significant segments of the plural society. This can take several different forms, such as a grand coalition cabinet in a parliamentary system, a 'grand' council or committee with important advisory functions, or a grand coalition of a president and other top officeholders in a presidential system. The other three basic elements of consociational democracy are (1) the mutual veto or 'concurrent majority' rule, which serves as an additional protection of vital minority interests, (2) proportionality as the principal standard of political representation, civil service appointments, and allocation of public funds, and (3) a high degree of autonomy for each segment to run its own internal affairs." See Arnold Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 25.

6. Farish A. Noor, "Images of Islam in America: Terrorising the Truth," *JUST Commentary*, 1997, 4.

7. Raja Muhammad Zafarul Haq, "The Image of Islam in the West," *The Muslim World*, 92, no. 2 (2002): 147. "Muslim Countries Asked to Counter Islamophobia in USA" *The Muslim World*, 92, Issue 4 (2002).

8. See *Sūrat al-An'ām*, 6:54. K.K Usman ed., *This is Islam*, 2nd ed. (Cochin: Forum for Faith and Fraternity, 2001); Khurshid Ahmad, *Islam: Its Meaning and Message* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1976).

9. See Alexander Berzin, *Buddhism and Its Impact on Asia*. Asian Monographs, no. 8 (Cairo: Cairo University, Center for Asian Studies, June 1996); Harun Yahaya, *Islam and Buddhism* (Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2003); Hans Kueng and Mohd Kamal Hassan, *Towards a Common Civilization* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, 1997).