

## **Religious Tolerance in Islam: Theories, Practices and Malaysia's Experiences as a Multi Racial Society**

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### **Abstract**

Religious tolerance in Islam can be looked at from two perspectives: firstly, the theory of religious tolerance particularly propounded in the Qur'an; secondly, the practices of religious tolerance exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad and his Successors. Islam as a religion consists of certain principles that deal with its adherents and non-adherents. Some of these principles are very fundamental for Muslims, who raise a question as to what extent Islam allows its adherents to tolerate others in matters that affect these fundamental principles. This question is very much relevant to multi-racial and multi-religious Malaysia which has its experiences of harmony among its various religious communities, reducing tension within the society. This article discusses all these dimensions of religious tolerance with special reference to Malaysia, concluding that tolerance can be achieved only when there is a mutual understanding amongst the members of a society and an eagerness to respect each other's rights.

**Keywords:** Religious Tolerance, The Qur'an, Multi-Religious, Malaysia, Harmony.

### **Abstrak**

Toleransi agama dalam Islam boleh dilihat dari dua perspektif: pertama, teori toleransi agama yang diajukan dalam al-Quran; keduanya, pengamalan toleransi agama dicontohi oleh Nabi Muhammad (saw) dan para pengikutnya. Islam sebagai agama, mengandungi prinsip-prinsip tertentu untuk berurusan dengan penganutnya dan bukan penganutnya. Beberapa prinsip-prinsip ini adalah sangat asas bagi umat Islam, yang menanyakan soalan seperti sejauh manakah Islam membenarkan mereka bertolak ansur dengan orang lain dalam perkara-perkara yang memberi kesan kepada prinsip-prinsip asas mereka. Soalan ini sangat berkaitan dengan negara Malaysia yang berbilang kaum dan berbilang agama dan mempunyai pengalaman keharmonian di kalangan masyarakat pelbagai agama, mengurangkan ketegangan dalam masyarakat. Artikel ini membincangkan semua dimensi toleransi agama dengan rujukan khas terhadap Malaysia, menyimpulkan bahawa toleransi hanya boleh dicapai apabila terdapat satu persefahaman di kalangan ahli masyarakat dan kesungguhan untuk menghormati hak masing-masing.

**Kata Kunci:** Toleransi Agama, Al-Quran, Berbilang Agama, Malaysia, Keharmonian.

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### Introduction: Meaning of Tolerance

Tolerance has been widely accepted as a virtue related to human conduct. It deals with all aspects of human life: religious affairs, sexual practices, free expression and ethnic matters. According to the Oxford Dictionary, tolerance is the capacity to tolerate something in which the verb ‘to tolerate’ means to allow the existence or occurrence of something without authoritative interference. It also means to sustain and endure. It might involve dislike or disapproval of the thing tolerated. The word in Arabic which is widely used to denote tolerance is “tasāmuḥ”. The root form of this word has two connotations: generosity (jūd wa karam) and ease (tasāmuḥ). Thus the term is quite different from the English use of the word tolerance, “Where tolerance indicates a powerful, grudgingly bearing or putting up with others who are different, the Arabic term denotes generosity and ease from both sides on a reciprocal basis.”<sup>1</sup> According to Muzammil Siddiqi there are also other words that have similar meanings, such as “ḥilm” (forbearance) or “‘afw” (pardon, forgiveness) or “ṣafḥ” (overlooking, forbearance).<sup>2</sup> Tolerance is an attitude of someone towards others which involves two parties. It could be tolerance of someone towards his own self or towards others, which is more common than the first. Tolerance happens in the situation in which conflicting disagreement occurs between two individuals or groups and when there is no way for each of them to abandon their own concept in order to accept the concept of the other group. As a concept, tolerance means “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of world’s cultures, forms of expression and ways of being human”.<sup>3</sup> It is, as put by Barbara Herman, “offered as a reasonable strategy of response to a wide range of moral disagreements in circumstances of pluralism”.<sup>4</sup> The core of the concept of toleration is “the refusal where one has the power do so,

<sup>1</sup> Abdel Haleem, Muhammad, *Understanding the Qur’an: Themes and Styles*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999, p.73.

<sup>2</sup> [www.crescentlife.com/spritually/tolerance\\_islamic\\_perspective.htm](http://www.crescentlife.com/spritually/tolerance_islamic_perspective.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Siddiqi, Muzammil, retrieved from [www.crescentlife.com/spritually/tolerance\\_islamic\\_perspective.htm](http://www.crescentlife.com/spritually/tolerance_islamic_perspective.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Barbare Herman, *Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgement in ‘Toleration An Elusive Virtue’* ed. David Heyd, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, p.61.

to prohibit or seriously interfere with conduct that one finds objectionable.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Charles Teague, “the most pervasive problem involves the relationship not in context of family or humanity but religious communities and the broader society in which they exist.”

<sup>6</sup> Chaumont claims that “the primary fact of religious life in our time is its plurality. Race, ethos, history, and geography are some of the factors that pluralize human societies and set the stage for conflicts that may be violently acted out or sublimated in myriad ways. Among all possible factors, the diversity of religion is the one that creates the most subtle responses to the many differences that fragment the human communities of this world.”<sup>7</sup> With regard to this article, it will focus only on religious tolerance from Islamic perspective.

### **Islam and Tolerance**

Tolerance is a basic principle of Islam. It does not mean a lack of principles, or lack of seriousness about one’s own principles. It does not mean that a Muslim should neglect his own obligations. Tolerance, according to Islam, does not mean that its members believe that all religions are the same.<sup>8</sup> However, what are the areas of tolerance? The Islamic conception of tolerance is similar to what UNESCO conceives of it: tolerance is:

Consistent with respect for human rights, the practice of tolerance does not mean toleration of social injustice or the abandonment or weakening of one’s convictions. It means that one is free to adhere to one’s own convictions and accepts that others adhere to theirs. It means accepting the fact that human beings, naturally diverse in their appearance, situation, speech, behaviour and values, have

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<sup>5</sup> John Harton, Toleration as a Virtue in *‘Toleration An Elusive Virtue’* ed. David Heyd, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Teague, Charles, ‘Freedom of religion: the freedom to draw circles’ in *Religious Traditions and the limits of tolerance*, USA: Anima Publication, 1988, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jules Chaumont, ‘How Tolerant Can A Unificationist Be’, in *Religious Traditions and the limits of tolerance*, USA: Anima Publication, 1988, pp. 43-44.

<sup>8</sup> Siddiqi, Muzammil, retrieved from [www.crescentlife.com/spritually/tolerance\\_islamic\\_perspective.htm](http://www.crescentlife.com/spritually/tolerance_islamic_perspective.htm)

the right to live in peace and to be as they are. It also means that one's views are not to be imposed on others.<sup>9</sup>

Based on these principles, tolerance deals with four issues: the dignity of human beings, the basic equality of all human beings, universal rights and fundamental freedom of thought, conscience and belief. The basis for these elements is recognised in the Qur'an, exemplified in the Prophet Muhammad's tradition and acknowledged in Islamic Law.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, Islam has been misunderstood by some people as a religion which promotes violence and terrorism. This misunderstanding is essentially based not on the established principles in Islam, but on some examples presented by those who claim to be among Muslims. In regards to the legitimacy of the concepts and guidance, Islam as a faith must be understood from its main sources which are the Qur'an, the word of God, and the sunnah or the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. Right understanding of Islam is very significant to understand the issue of religious tolerance in Islam. Muslims are urged to adhere to their beliefs and actions according to these two sources and not to follow other than these otherwise they are considered misguided by the appeal of their own desires.

Among many things that everyone should know about Islam is its dimensions. Its goals are to secure and develop the human beings in five basic areas: the life, the family and children, the mind, the freedom of faith, and the rights of ownership in case of private or public property. In other words, these elements of Islam are belief (ʿaqīdah) worship (ʿibādah), ethics (akhlāq) and laws (sharīʿah). As for the first two, they are not imposed on non-Muslims. This is consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an revealed in both its Meccan and Medinan chapters. The verses "And had your Lord willed those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So, will you then compel mankind until they become believers" (10:99) and "there is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) do not tolerate non-Muslims grudgingly, but welcome them to live in a Muslim society.<sup>11</sup> In parallel to this, Islam does not impose alms-giving (zakāt) and participation in jihād on non-

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<sup>9</sup> [www.freewebs.com/duisoc/tolerance.htm](http://www.freewebs.com/duisoc/tolerance.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Abdel Haleem, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

Muslims, though these two considerably contribute to the resources and the security of the state. The reason is that these two are considered as solely religious duties, hence confined only to Muslims. However, as for ethics, its principles are not different from those of other religions. All religions emphasise on virtues such as justice (ʿadl), mercy (raḥmah), performance of good deeds (iḥsān), love (maḥabbah), modesty (ʿiffah), bravery (shajāʿah), generosity (sakhāʾ) cooperation (al-taʿāwun) and disapprove of vices such as adultery (zinā), injustice (zulm), deceit (ghishsh), consumption of orphan's property (akl māl al-yatīm), and harshness to the weak (al-qaswah ʿalā al-ḍuʿafāʾ). As for the legal system of Islam, only certain aspects are applicable to non-Muslims in order to organise and harmonise the fabric and structure of a society. However, regarding family laws, non-Muslims are free to choose either to follow Islamic law or to adhere to the teachings of their own religion. Thus non-Muslims have a right to have their own civil court pertaining to their religious matters.<sup>12</sup>

After having considered these ideas, I would like to elaborate on Islamic tolerance of other religions. In discussing this, the article would be confined to the issue of Islamic tolerance of non-Muslims in an Islamic state.

To begin with, I would like to refer to the question, why non-Muslim minorities living in the Islamic states have to follow the constitution which is based on the Islam? Does this not contradict human freedom, or deny the freedom of religion to others which is upheld in Islam? The answer to this is that living in the Islamic state but ignoring its right to implement its teachings and fundamental principles for the sake of minorities is in fact to oppose the principle of freedom for Muslims who must adhere to their religious teachings when they are the majority in the state. This concept of respecting the rights of the majority by the minorities is accepted even by democracy. However, this right should be followed with the condition that the Islamic state should not be unjust towards the rights of non-Muslim minorities.<sup>13</sup>

Islam divides non-Muslims into: firstly, those who show antagonism against Muslims, and secondly, those who show

<sup>12</sup> See: Al-Qaraḍāwī, Yūsuf, *al-Aqallīyyāt al-Dīniyyah wa al-Hill al-Islāmī*, Beirut: Muʿassat al-Risalah, 2000. Pp. 13-15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

peacefulness towards Muslims. With regards the first, Islam has laid down certain criteria on how to deal with them and this is discussed extensively in the chapter of jihād and siyar of Islamic jurisprudential works. Pertaining to the second group of those who live in the Islamic state, Islam regards them as its citizens and satisfies their rights. The classical term for this group was *ahl-dhimmah*, those who are under protection. Therefore, non-Muslims are not second class citizens, thus in our contemporary situation, even though this term does not intend to imply derogation (*dhamma* or *tanqīṣ*), the use of this term could be altered to non-Muslims in the Islamic state.<sup>14</sup>

Human freedom and equality are fundamental in any democracy. Islam regards that human beings are of equal in status. The Qur'an reiterates that all men, though they are divided into nations and races, share certain characteristics. These identities are origin, responsibility, utilization of the resources and destiny.<sup>15</sup> Human beings are equal as they descend from the same father, i.e. Adam. What differentiates one man from the other is his fear of God and good deeds. Islam considers "human dignity" fundamental for its ideology, or in other words, its principles for its way of life. Verse 17:71 of the Qur'an has shown that all the children of Adam have been granted "dignity" by their Creator without any difference, and this human dignity has to be secured and maintained by His guidance and laws by the Muslim teachers and authorities, and should never be subject to compulsion. According to Fathī Uthmān<sup>16</sup>, "the human dignity is comprehensive; it encompasses all the human dimensions: spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical."

Apart from realizing that all human beings are the same in origin which constitutes their dignity, what helps Muslims to be tolerant of non-Muslims is that they are taught to realise that differences in religions happen because of the will of God who confers on man freedom to choose his own belief. In verses 18:29 and 10: 99 of the Qur'an Muslims are asked to be just and to have

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Berghout, Abdul Aziz, *Manāhij al-Da'wah*, Kuala Lumpur: Aslita Sdn Bhd, 2003, p. 260.

<sup>16</sup> Othmān, Mohamed Fathī, 'Modern Democracy and the Concept of Shura' in *Islam and Tolerance*, ed. Alhabshi, syed Othman Syed, and Hassan, Nik Mustapha Nik, Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 1996, pp. 99-101.

good ethics and fight against injustice even if it is against non-Muslims.<sup>17</sup>

God has created people to be different and they will always remain different not only in their appearance, but also in their beliefs and it is up to each person whether to become a believer or not.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Islamic tolerance of non-Muslims in matters of religion is that non-Muslims are allowed to perform their beliefs and religious duties, and live according to their customs, even if they are forbidden in Islam. If Jews believe that they should not work on Saturday, they should be allowed to do so because it is related to their religion. Similarly for Christians, if they believe that they should go to church on Sunday they cannot be prevented from doing so. Hence, the Islamic state should be tolerant of non-Muslims in matters regarding their religion even though they contravene with Islamic beliefs. Even though the Islamic state within its power is able to prevent non-Muslims from doing certain things in order to be in line with the ideology of the state, it still allows them to enjoy some of the things which are allowable in their religions as long as this does not harm the state and the society. Thus, even though the Christians are not ordered to drink wine and eat pork, they are not prevented from doing so because this is allowed in their religion.<sup>19</sup>

This toleration of non-Muslims is also seen in their right to bring up their children on their own faith. The right connected with the actual exercise of ritual worship implies the right to educate, to assemble and to organize activities. The right to educate their children concerns religion only, not the civil or public life of the Islamic state as a whole, of which they are members. Hence the Islamic state should grant non-Muslim children the right to have lessons on their religion at school, but not the right to run their own schools, unless such schools conform in terms of the curriculum and general spirit to the public schools. This is because the demands of national integration do not allow any system to

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<sup>17</sup> See: Al-Qaradāwī, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>18</sup> See: Abdel Haleem, *op. cit.*, p. 75

<sup>19</sup> See: Al-Qaradāwī, *op. cit.*, p. 33; See: Abdel Haleem, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

contribute to the fragmentation or dissolution of the unity of the state.<sup>20</sup>

Islam has shown its tolerance towards non-Muslims within the scope which does not require interference from the state. It is up to the Muslim societies to show their tolerance of the adherents of different religions. The Qur'an insists that a son should respect his parents who are not Muslims. The verse 31:15 of the Qur'an praises those who feed the prisoners including the non-Muslim prisoners (76:8) and allows Muslims to spend their money even on non-Muslims (2:272).

The constitution of Medina during the time of the Prophet Muhammad encouraged cooperation and solidarity in a plural society consisting of Muslims, Christians, Jews and others. Though the constitution was violated at a certain point by the Jewish treachery, it was nonetheless a remarkable effort to put into actual practice the universal ideas of the Qur'an. The Prophet forged a treaty with the Christian monks of Najrān. The people of Najrān were given pledge that their religious rights will be protected and the sanctity of their monastery will be preserved provided they too showed respect for Islam and the emerging Muslim community. Asmā' bint Abī Bakr was ordered by the Prophet to maintain good relations with her mother who was a disbeliever. The Prophet used to visit the people of the Book, welcomed their visits, visited the sick among them, received presents from them and gave assistance to them. The people of the Book on some occasions were allowed to perform their prayer in the Muslim mosque in Medina. During the time of the Caliph ʿUmar, he maintained the same attitude. On one occasion, it is reported that he gave the order that one Jewish family would receive a permanent charity benefit from the public treasury (bayt al-māl). Even though he was hit to death by a non-Muslim, he gave a will to his successor to do good to non-Muslims in the Islamic state.<sup>21</sup>

ʿUmar also showed how tolerant he was through his treatment of the Jews and Christians of Byzantium after the

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<sup>20</sup> See: Fārūqī, Ismā'īl R., 'The Rights of non-Muslims under Islam: Social and Cultural Aspects' in *Muslim Communities in non-Muslim States*, London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1980, pp. 56-60.

<sup>21</sup> See: Al-Qarāḍāwī, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-36.



conquest of its territories. The text of the treaty of the surrender of Jerusalem was written by Mu'āwiyah and was signed by Sophronious, the Patriarch of the city, on behalf of the Christians. Among many things the treaty guaranteed, the safety of person and property, the right to practise their non-Islamic religions, and to preserve whatever public institutions they had such as churches and schools which were usually attached to the churches.<sup>22</sup>

In Spain where Muslims ruled from 711 until the fall of Granada in 1492, the three Abrahamic communities – Christians, Jews and Muslims – lived in great harmony for long periods of time. Andalusia, as an Islamic Spain, was known “an exemplar of religious tolerance. It also produced a flowering of science, arts and letters.”<sup>23</sup> Contrary to this was what happened when the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella seized Granada from the Muslims in 1492. Thousands of Jews and Muslims were either killed or expelled in waves because of religious persecution. “Like Spain, Muslim rule in India was also tolerant and compassionate. Aurangzeb was very accommodative towards non-Muslims in his Empire. He employed the largest number of Hindus in the highest echelons of administrative and military service.”<sup>24</sup>

Adam Smith states that the Islamic states did not try to enforce Islamic religious identity onto other religions; rather they opted to be tolerant to the extent that some Muslim Caliphs went to the festivals of the non-Muslims and non-Muslims were allowed to construct their places of worship. It is reported that al-Layth ibn Sa'd and 'Abd Allah ibn Luhay'ah, the second century Hijri Muslim scholars, viewed the construction of churches as part of the state's development, arguing that some of the churches in Egypt were constructed during the time of the Companions of the Prophet and their Successor.<sup>25</sup>

This attitude of Muslim leaders towards non-Muslims who lived in their society was so outstanding that Muslim societies

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<sup>22</sup> See: Fārūqī, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-60.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Lee, 1993, cited in Chandra Muzaffar, 1996, p. 140. See Muzaffar, Chandra, ‘Tolerance in the Malaysian Political Scene’ in *Islam and Tolerance*, d. Alhabshi, syed Othman Syed, and Hassan, Nik Mustapha Nik, Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Chandra Muzaffar, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-1.

<sup>25</sup> See: Sharīf, 'Umar, *Muzhakkirat fi Nizam al-Hukm wa al-Idara fi al-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah*, Cairo: Matba'a al-Sa'ida, 1979, p. 133.

came to be regarded as outstanding models of inter-ethnic, inter-religious harmony and good relations within the historical surroundings in which they operated; in the words of Seyyid Hosein Nasr,

In the case of Islam it is particularly interesting that it is the only religion before the modern era which had confronted every major religious tradition of mankind with the exception of Shintoism and the American Indian religions. It had encountered Christianity and Judaism in its birthplace, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Mithraism in Persia, Shamanism, which in its Asian form is a sister religion of Shintoism and the North American religions, in central Asia and Mongolia, the native African religions south of the Sahara and, of course, Hinduism and Buddhism in India and eastern Persia.<sup>26</sup>

Before taking up the next discussion, it is important to stress here that there is a limit to the concept of tolerance. Muslims' tolerance of non-Muslims is bound with their Islamic teachings. They are under the obligation not to dilute their religious teachings in keeping with whatever practices or campaigns appear in the society around them. They are under a religious obligation to cooperate with other people who work to maintain what is good but not to do what is wrong as stated in the Qur'an, "Aid one another in what is good and pious, do not aid one another in what is sinful and aggression." (5:2)<sup>27</sup>

### **Malaysia and its Experiences in Dealing with Multi Religious Society<sup>28</sup>**

It is vital to have a clear perception of Malaysian history to understand the issue of tolerance in Malaysia. Located on the south-eastern edge of the Asian continent, Malaysia, formerly known as Malaya, comprises a peninsula and two states (Sarawak and Sabah) on the island of Borneo in the South China Sea. Malaysia is ethnically diverse, with a population of about twenty

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<sup>26</sup> Chandra Muzaffar, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-9.

<sup>27</sup> See: Abdel Haleem, *op. cit.*, P. 80.

<sup>28</sup> The study on the practice of religious tolerance in Malaysia focuses on certain issues since its independence day until 1990.

million on the peninsula comprising approximately 55 percent Malays, 34 percent Chinese, 10 percent Indian, and less than one percent of other ethnic groups including aborigines (orang asli), Europeans, and Eurasians. The religious demography of the peninsula is also complex: based on 1980 data about 56 percent are Muslims, 32 percent Buddhist-Taoists, 8 percent Hindus, 2 percent Christians, and 2 percent Sikhs' Baha'is, animists, atheists, or religiously anonymous.<sup>29</sup>

The Malays were recognized as the earliest community who settled in Malaysia. Before the coming of Islam, the majority of them believed in Hinduism and Buddhism. According to some, Islam arrived in Southeast Asia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century through traders from the Arab and India who came to Malaysia in the next century. Islam was established in Melaka in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These traders successfully managed to convert the local people and the rulers to Islam. The Malay rulers who adhered to Hinduism turned to accept Islam and gradually devised an initiative to amend some of the local laws to be in line with Islamic law.

As for the Chinese, their mass settlement in Malaya took place after 1800 under the support of British administration. British commercial development, particularly in tin mining, speeded up the migration of Chinese entrepreneurs and labourers.<sup>30</sup> As regard to the introduction of Buddhism to the Malay Peninsula during the first five centuries C.E., it is closely linked to Indianization and early state formation. From the late twelfth century through fifteenth century, Islam spread steadily through the Indonesian archipelago, and by the end of the fifteenth century the Malay rulers of the Indianized maritime trading states had all converted to Islam. Buddhism reappeared on the peninsula with the advent of immigrant Chinese labourers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>31</sup>

As for the Indians, "their contacts with the Malaysian peninsula can be traced to pre-Christian times, but trading and cultural activities increased during the early centuries of the

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<sup>29</sup> See: Lee, Raymond L.M. and Ackermann, Susan E., *Sacred Tensions Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia*, US: University of South Carolina Press, 1997, P. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

Christian era. It was during this period that Hindu ideas were immersed into the cultural structure of the Malay kingdoms. Hinduism in contemporary Malaysia is practised mainly within the Indian community. From the latter half of the nineteenth century until the eve of World War II, the modern Indian migrant to Malaya was chiefly an unlettered labourer, the majority originated from South India, coming into the country to work for a pittance on some plantation or government project. Between 1840 and 1940 about four million Indians arrived in colonial Malaya; they were mostly low-caste Tamils and untouchables.”<sup>32</sup>

According to Muzaffar, the vast demographic transformation which colonialism created did not in any way revolutionise the nature of these polities. For the Chinese and Indian immigrants of the early decades of the last century remained on the outside of these societies: they were part of the economic enclaves created by colonial rule. Neither the colonial administration nor the Malay rulers regarded them as citizens. It was only after the Second World War that the situation began to change dramatically. A lot of Chinese and Indians were conferred citizenship rights on a very liberal basis. Their children were even bestowed automatic citizenship in the 1957 Constitution of independent Malaya which at least reduced the tension among them about their status.<sup>33</sup>

Their incorporation into the Malayan and later Malaysian state transformed the very character of the society. It was no longer an exclusive Malay community. Malaysia had become a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society. This pluralism could be a reason for Malaysia to gain its secular Constitution although Islam is the official religion of the Federation.<sup>34</sup> In the process, the Malays who once set up the nation had become a community among communities.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the Malays are still the most important ethnic group in Malaysia and Islam, and the Malay’s ethnicity is vital for the Malays’ identity.<sup>36</sup> In term of language used in educational system at school level, the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

<sup>33</sup> See: Muzaffar, *op. cit.*, P. 122.

<sup>34</sup> For reasons why Malaysia was made a secular state, see: Hashimah, *op. cit.* pp. 33-4.

<sup>35</sup> See: Muzaffar, *op. cit.*, P. 123.

<sup>36</sup> For reasons why Malaysia was made a secular state, see: Hashimah, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-4.

Malay language has been accepted as the national and official language of the land. However, vernacular primary school education in Chinese and Tamil has been allowed as an optional medium. Although this school system is for these two races, it accepts the enrolment of the Malay students. All religious ethnic activities were assisted financially and morally by the government. Hock describes the way of independence as:

a constitution that would satisfy the British that the rights and privileges of all the communities were safeguarded. The essence of bargains was the acceptance by the non-Malay leaders that the Malays, as the indigenous race, were entitled to political dominance, while in return the Malay leaders recognized that the socio-economic pursuits of non-Malays should not be infringed upon.<sup>37</sup>

It is interesting to note that religion was adopted as a basis for the Malay ethnic boundary which, according to the constitution, the Malay is one “who professes the Muslim religion, habitually conforms to Malay customs”. This, according to Hashimah, “was merely to give a legal recognition to the position that existed before, that is, to equate Malay with Muslim”.<sup>38</sup>

The government took various steps to accommodate the needs of the new multi-racial religious society. Apart from building mosques for Muslims, the government established the Islamic Centre under the patronage of the national mosque which was officially opened in 1965 to strengthen the government’s role pertaining to the administration of Islam in Malaysia.<sup>39</sup> The Malaysian Pilgrims Management and Funds Board (MPMF) was formally established in 1962 as a body for centralizing Muslims’ savings for the pilgrimage. Another institution, the Malaysian Islamic Economic Development Foundation was established by the prime minister in 1976 as a trust to collect donations, which are invested largely in properties, shares, and securities. Among these multi-million-dollar institutions was the Islamic Bank launched in

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<sup>37</sup> Oo Yu Hock, 1990, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Hashimah, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>39</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 43.

1983 and later has emerged as a dynamic banking alternative in the commercial world.<sup>40</sup> The NEP (New Economic Policy) which was established in 1970 generally created a wide range of opportunities for different sections of the Malay community. It improved socio-economic ethnic imbalances in the economy, thereby enhancing Malay consciousness of greater economic control through a system of special privileges, and later became “an economic and political context that accelerated the rationalization of Islam.”<sup>41</sup>

Non-Muslims in Malaysia are given rights to exercise their religious obligations. As for Buddhism, besides the construction of the temples, a great number of Buddhist associations were established such as the Penang Buddhist Association (PBA) in 1925, Buddhist Missionary Society (BMS) in 1961, Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Center (MBMC) in 1968, Malaysian Buddhist Institute and Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia (YBAM) in 1970.<sup>42</sup>

Hindus in Malaysia are free to celebrate their religious festivals. More than one hundred Hindu temples were established in Malaysia. The celebration of Thaipusam is done in Kuala Lumpur in which its followers will march to Batu Caves. They also established several movements and centres for their religious activities. The Malayan Tamil Pannai (MTP) was set up in 1948 in Kuala Lumpur and Tiruvarul Tava Nerik Manram (TTNM) in 1962.<sup>43</sup>

As for other religions, for example Christianity, “unlike Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, which have clear-cut links with specific ethnic identities, the Christian identity in Malaysia lacks any explicit connection with particular ethnic groups. Christianity in Malaysia cuts across the boundaries separating the Chinese, Indian, Eurasians, aborigines”<sup>44</sup> and lately a few Malays. Nevertheless, thousands of churches have been constructed throughout Malaysia.

As for the administration of religious activities in Malaysia, it is as Lee states:

unlike some countries in Asia that have centralized government agencies for the administration of religion, for example Indonesia, Malaysia has no such agency. Islam in Malaysia is administered separately from the

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<sup>40</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 63..

<sup>42</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 107.

<sup>43</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 114.

<sup>44</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 38.

non-Islamic religions. Constitutionally, federal and state control of Islamic legislation and administration is separate. Each of the eleven states of the peninsula has its own legal enactment pertaining to the administration of Islamic law (shari'a). The provisions of these enactments authorize the traditional ruler of each state to assign members of the religious council (majlis agama), the Islamic judiciary, functionaries of mosques, and registrars of Muslim marriages and divorce and to direct the Islamic judiciary on matters concerning legal procedures without contravening the substantive law of shari'a. The federal parliament has no legal jurisdiction over Islamic legislation and administration in the individual states except in the Federal Territory. Islamic bureaucracy at the federal level is controlled by a religious council through the offices of the Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Department. A national council for Islamic affairs is also located within the Federal Territory. This council, headed by the prime minister, was formed in 1968 to coordinate the administration of Islam through the participation of representatives from each state, although some states, such as Johor, Kedah, and Pahang, are not involved. The national council cannot interfere directly with Islamic matters at the state level, but it can in its advisory capacity exercise limited influence on their course of development.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to this, each region in Malaysia has a religious department which controls the administration of the affairs and has its own ruling council.<sup>46</sup>

In dealing with the non-Muslims, the government faces a different set of problems. Islamic religious department also implemented a number of specific laws to control the Muslim moral such as khalwat (close proximity). Although it is limited to Muslims but has raised concerns among non-Muslims whether they

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<sup>45</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 39.

<sup>46</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 137.

will be affected by the law since an attempt was done in 1989 by the state of Selangor to amend its Islamic laws to include prosecution of non-Muslim khalwat lawbreakers.<sup>47</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Islam advocates tolerance. It provides not only theories, but comes with exemplified models. Certain intolerant acts performed by some individual Muslims cannot be the basis to deny the policy of tolerance that exists in Islam. Acts of intolerance could be based on a misunderstanding of Islamic teachings. However, in promoting tolerance, Islam has its limits within the boundaries set by the sharī'ah. Even though Islam cannot accept things that contradict its fundamental beliefs and teachings, it has its own solution in dealing with situations and all types of encounters. Regarding the situation in Malaysia, even though the government has tried its best to accommodate the needs of the multi-religious society, there is still a room for improvement.

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<sup>47</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 137.