

A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH TOWARDS DIALOGUE HARMONY PROGRAM AS A MEDIUM OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ON TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

Dialogue Harmony is the first interfaith dialogue program that officially broadcasted on television (TV Al Hijrah). The purpose of this study is to examine the objectives and point of view from the producer of Dialogue Harmony program on TV Al-Hijrah. This qualitative study was conducted by using face to face interview with the producer of Dialogue Harmony program on TV Al Hijrah. Based on the qualitative analysis, it was found that even though this program is still new and slightly more sensitive to be accepted by some parties, Dialogue Harmony program can be as a medium of interfaith dialogue that could give an explanations, understanding and reducing the religious issues between people of various backgrounds and religions in this country. Therefore, Dialogue Harmony is one of the interfaith dialogue program that can cultivate a sense of respect among other religious adherents in Malaysia. The implication of this study shows that Dialogue Harmony program on TV Al-Hijrah should be continued because it could serve as a major platform in enlightening the prevailing misconceptions among multiple races, nations, cultures and religions in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Dialogue Harmony program, Interfaith Dialogue, TV Al-Hijrah.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dialogue Harmony is an interfaith dialogue program as Malaysia's first officially broadcasted on television. In line with the objectives of TV Al-Hijrah stations; it is to unite a community and foster racial unity in Malaysia. Based on the program broadcasting on TV Al-Hijrah, Dialogue Harmony is one of a new program which can unite multiracial citizen in Malaysia. Azizan Baharudin (2008) describes that we are now facing problems regarding interfaith issues in our country and for the sake of that dialogue showed it can make the relationship between harmony and integration of people. It also will be the main key in order to maintain peacefulness. In addition, Leonard Swidler (1992) says that dialogue is a word being used in

this era as a meeting and discussion between certain individuals or different groups and ideologies. The main objective is to get understand each other amongst participants until they can get it improved into another better level of understanding clearly.

In Malaysia, there is non-Muslim religious leaders primarily of religious officials from the four main religions had come to a consensus to form Malaysian Consultative for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) which was also known as the Malaysian Religious Consultative Council (Ahmad Munawar Ismail & Wan Kamal Mujani, 2012). The main interest of this establishment is to addresses inter-religious issues and social issues that affect the religious life of minority religious group in the country. This shows that how much concern has been given from the government to them related the unity and religious harmony among multiple religions in this country. In some way it reflects fairness and tolerance to live in harmony and peace. Each religion's in Malaysia has right to voice out their opinions in their religious life in Malaysia.

Unfortunately, after unexpected incidents occurred such as the pig's head provocation at one of the mosque in Kuala Lumpur lately has causing great tense between other religions adherents in this country. Those are some of several examples which affect the tension between religious adherents in Malaysia (Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim et al., 2011). Recently in 2014, the continuous controversy related to the use of the word "Allah" for non-Muslims and bomb blast incident type (Molotov cocktail) at a church in Penang (Farid Alatas, 2014). The incidents occurred above are some examples that can be taken as a lesson to all of us.

Thus, TV Al-Hijrah took an action by broadcasting Dialogue Harmony as a way of one approach to relieve this unconditionally tense and giving explanation to people. In the same time this program is hope to be one of the way to make us realize the importance of living in unity among multiple races and religions in this country. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the objectives and point of view from the producer of Dialogue Harmony on TV Al-Hijrah. Then, followed by discussion, suggestion and conclusions. This research is based on an interview with producer of Dialogue Harmony on TV Al-Hijrah and supported literature from the previous studies.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the Malaysian context, religion closely associated with racial identity. The majority are Malay Muslims, followed by the Buddhist, Christian, Hindus and others. Christianity is a religion that is growing across the races. According to Census 2010, Malaysia has a population of 28.3 million. Islam is the most widely professed religion with 61.3% being Muslims. Buddhist form 19.8% of the population, Christian 9.2% and Hindus 6.3%. As a country of multiple religions and races living under one administrative monarchy, no doubt there are times when there is some wave of racial or religious sentiments played by certain people whether intentionally or not, and obviously it will effects the stability and the unity of the various races in Malaysia. Even the impact of these small events should not be taken lightly by us as a people. Starting with racial provocation then extended to the religious sentiment, it is possible that one day event May 13, 1969 will be repeated again. And at that moment Malaysia may be bathed in blood or suffer worse consequences.

With the diversity of race, ethnicity and religion in this country, it becomes a challenge to create unity and harmony in Malaysia. Thus, the socio-political landscape of the country, there are a variety of dark history in the context of race relations and religions. Among major incidents are such as the 1969 racial riots, Maria Hertogh case, Kampung Medan and other incidents such as the issue of the bloody head of cattle in Selangor and put a pig's head in the mosque in Kuala Lumpur (Rahimin Affandi Abd Rahim et al., 2011). The incident of May 13,

1969 is the worst history which has been seen the conflict between ethnic relations among multiple religions happened in Malaysia. The fight has prevailed after celebrating the victory of opposition's party in next general election held after that. Many people are caught in the midst of chaos that horror and terrible. Some of the people were killed, wounded, burned houses, destroyed property and vehicles (Comber, 2001).

Therefore, based on the above situations, interfaith dialogue is one of the medium that can be used as a tool for a peace and harmony among multiple communities in Malaysia. Dialogue is a medium in explaining and elaborating the message between multiple religions. According to Jagir Singh, the President of Consultative Counsel of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism (MCCBCHST), in the work of Hariati Azizian (2014) in Sunday Star, entitled "Time to root for more tolerance",

"The basic requirement is that each of us must respect the diversity of the religions and cultures in the country. We should also accept that all religions are revelations of God-which they come from God and came into existence only by the will of God. If you accept that we all of the one creator, you accept that cultures are also the will of God. So, the diversity and plurality that we see in the country is also the will of God. If God wanted, he could have created one single culture and race but in his wisdom he created many cultures and races. In the universe there are many species of animals and plants. So, when we look at the creation, we can see that it is a blessing". (Jagir Singh, 2014: 21).

From the quotation above, we can understand that non-Muslims in Malaysia welcome interfaith dialogue provided everyone must respect the diversity of religions and cultures in the country. Meanwhile, Farid Alatas expresses his concern about the development of interfaith dialogue in Malaysia in his article in New Sunday Time on March 2014, entitled "Inter-religious dialogues a part of Islamic heritage" according to him,

"Dialogue in Malaysia has far from lived up to its potential to solve or minimize inter-religious or inter-ethnic conflicts and disagreements. During the last few years, several events took place that threaten to disrupt the racial and religious harmony that this country has enjoyed for so long. The on-going controversy over the word "Allah", the recent explosion of a Molotov cocktail at a Penang church in January. The pig head incident of 2012, and the cow's head protest in August 2009, are just few examples that suggest there is a danger that race and inter-religious relations may deteriorate in the near future, particularly if certain political groups, NGOs and the media act in an irresponsible manner and incite hatred between communities. As Islam is the religion of state in the country, it is the Islamic religious authorities should take the lead in inter-religious dialogue. The goal of such dialogue is to create an atmosphere of trust among the leaders of different religious communities have with each other, and to possibly solve these problems before they become ammunition for politicians, bigots and hate mongers" (Farid Alatas, 2014). He further disapproves the idea of some Muslims that if Muslims enter into inter religious dialogue; it is recognition of the theological equality of Islam with other religions. Since Islam is the one true religion, the argument goes; it cannot put itself at the level of the other religions by conceding dialogue¹. This erroneous view arises from a lack of knowledge of inter-religious dialogue as part of Islamic heritage, he argues.

Although there is another type of Muslims who disagree with interfaith dialogue, not because of theological reason but because according to them lack of morality in conducting interfaith

¹ If that is the case why Jordan and Qatar established interfaith dialogue institutions? Therefore, it is clearly baseless argument.

dialogue (Syalaby, n.d: 72). In other words, they cannot see the concept of win-win situation could be achieved through this kind of dialogue. We do not know precisely the number of Muslims who disagree with interfaith dialogue, but based on the ground we can safely say that there is a good number of Muslims who actually engage in interfaith dialogue² or debate³.

Based on the above statement, although there is disagreement on the importance and benefits of engaging in interfaith dialogue, but TV Al-Hijrah plays a role in explaining, delivering and take an action to reduce the religious issues among multiple religious adherents in Malaysia through a new program in the name of "Dialogue Harmony". Realizing the nature of all the current issue above, TV Al-Hijrah station took an action to broadcast interfaith dialogue program entitled "Dialogue Harmony". Therefore, the researchers would like to study and examine the objective and point of view from the producer of Dialogue Harmony on TV Al-Hijrah.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research was conducted by a qualitatively via interview method. According to Barner (1985), an interview is one of the best methods to get the information in collecting the data. In addition, Salkind (2003) also stressed that interviews are a very powerful tool. An interview should allow full exploration of the subject at hand, including follow up questions. While, according to Babbie (2013), qualitative interview method is an interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry, including the topics to be covered. In this study, the researchers used the methods of collecting the data through interview and library research. According to Ahmad Sunawari Long (2011), interview is a method that directly leading to information and facts from respondent. Besides that, Denscombe (2003) described that through this method the respondent could respond faster and in fact it is more efficient getting the right fact at the right moment with more specifics answers. The researchers were interviewed the producer of Dialogue Harmony because they are the main key informant and key person in this program.

In this study, the researchers are only focusing on the point of view from the producer of Dialogue Harmony program in 2013 and 2014 on TV Al-Hijrah. They are as the key-person or key informant in this study. According to Laforest (2009) key informant is a people who are responsible in their position, activities and have a good understanding of the problem to be study. That is why the researchers choose the producer of Dialogue Harmony 2013 and 2014 because they were as the main key informants in this preliminary research. Thus, this program is the first interfaith dialogue program that was broadcasting on television in Malaysia. The researchers were choose the producer as a main key-informant because the producers knows better about the program and responsible from the beginning until the end of this program.

4. THE BACKGROUND OF DIALOGUE HARMONY PROGRAM ON TV AL-HIJRAH

The program Dialogue Harmony was broadcasted on TV Al-Hijrah in 2013. It is a program that focuses on a dialogue between multiple religions and races in Malaysia. It is proven when the panelist of this program constitutes of different religion such as Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs. In addition, this is the first ever program that focuses on dialogues between different religions in Malaysia that has been broadcasted on TV Al-Hijrah.

² www.acommonword.com

³ www.shabbirally.com, www.debateinitiative.com, www.iera.com, www.peacetv.com, www.IPSI.com.

The meaning of Dialogue Harmony is having a dialogue harmoniously and to harmonize the citizens in Malaysia who have different religions and beliefs (Rosmawani Md Zain, 2013; Tengku Ismail, 2014). In this program, the religions that involved and participated in this interfaith dialogue program and represent their own religions were the religions of Islam, Buddhism, Christian, Hinduism and Sikhism. They were involved in order to deliver the right facts about their own religion which is always misunderstood by certain people.

Therefore, the purpose of this program is to establish the good relationship with other religions and to give an understanding to the public about the concept, practice, culture and traditions of other religions in Malaysia. Besides that, through this program it will cultivate a sense of respect among other religious adherents in this country (Rosmawani Md Zain, 2013; Tengku Ismail, 2014). In addition, the producers of this program said that if the program was viewed from the emotional sense, some of the people will think that this program intended to emphasize the equality of all religions. That was absolutely not true. Denying the accusation by some people, they were clarify that the primary objective of this program is to understand the message of Islam, Buddhism, Christian, Hinduism and Sikhism to the multiple communities, so it will develop mutual understanding and a sense of respect for the multiple religions in Malaysia.

Apart from that, the mission of Dialogue Harmony was to highlight the problem of religious issues and emphasized on misunderstanding that was occurred among other religions. As what we can see recently the provocative incidents such as pork thrown into a mosque, church burning, Bible burning and others. (Rosmawani Md Zain, 2013; Tengku Ismail, 2014). The idea to broadcast "Dialogue Harmony" was in general. At that time, Dato' Jamil Khir Baharom expressed his wish that a program of interfaith dialogue should be broadcasted to reduce some of the religious issues and social issues that was happened in this country. Then, TV Al -Hijrah submitted a proposal containing a description of the program called "Dialogue Harmony". Finally, the implementation of Dialogue Harmony was agreed by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Dato' Seri Jamil Khir Baharom and it was broadcasted by station TV Al-Hijrah (Rosmawani Md Zain, 2013; Tengku Ismail, 2014).

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of findings based on the interviews with the producers of Dialogue Harmony program, it can be said that Dialogue Harmony on TV Al-Hijrah is one of the new interfaith dialogue program that involve the religion of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian and Sikhism. In addition, Dialogue Harmony is one of the new interfaith dialogue program that broadcasted on television starting on 1 April 2013. This program can create a sense of respect towards other religious adherents in Malaysia. Through this program the representatives from each religion play a role in explaining their ideologies, culture, tradition, practice and belief towards the multiple communities in this country.

Suriani et al (2011) explains that media content is operating in line with the needs of the community. This shows that Malaysians currently need to be exposed the knowledge related to other religions in Malaysia. This is to some extent able to provide understanding and awareness to the multiple communities of different races, ethnics and religions in Malaysia as well as to create unity and harmony in religious life. From the results of this study showed that Dialogue Harmony on TV Al-Hijrah is one of the positive efforts in creating an attitude of respect and can give the awareness toward other religions in Malaysia.

This unity of life between multi-races and multiple religions in Malaysia can be proved through religious structure which is allowing everyone to practice their own religious life. It can be seen through the construction of places of worship is the proof that the relationship

between the multiple religions in Malaysia still reserved among them. For example Buddha; Statute of the Buddha in Sarawak and Burmese Buddhist Temple in Georgetown, Christian; Catholic Church Templer in Petaling Jaya and St. Peters Church (the oldest church in Malaysia which was built by the Dutch in 1710) in Malacca, Hindus; Arulmigu Mahamariamman Temple Lebuah Queen Street in Georgetown and Sri Sithi Vinayagar Temple Jalan Templer in Petaling Jaya cited by Ahmad f. Yousif (1998: 79-128) in the study of Khatijah Mohd Khambali & Mohd Herzali Mohd Haled (2008: 88).

The above conditions should be appreciated, preserved and maintained in order to ensure the continuity of the culture of tolerance, solidarity and harmony that can be appreciated in their religions. But to maintain and preserve all of the places of worship is not an easy task. However, such condition shows that the Government keens to the worship places and at the same time proves to the community with variety of religions in the country so they can live in peace with their respective faith. In this regard, it is in line with the objectives of the broadcasting Dialogue Harmony as a medium to build harmony and is an efforts to reduce the social tensions between religions in Malaysia. Dialogue Harmony TV show seen as a good starting point to reduce the conflict that occurred between religions and races in Malaysia.

No doubt an effort to resolve the religious issues that have occurred is difficult, but the Government's efforts and TV station (TV Al-Hijrah) play a role in reducing tension and anger the multiple religions, such as the issue of cow head parade in Selangor and place the pig's head in 2012 in mosques in Kuala Lumpur are one of several examples which affects the tension between adherents of religions in Malaysia (Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim et al., 2011), religious issues pertaining the use of the word "Allah" for non-Muslims and the cases on bomb blast incident type at church, Penang that make harmful situation among multiple religions in this country (Farid Alatas, 2014).

Based on the issues that occurred above, it shows that TV Al-Hijrah took an action to reduce religious tension and promote the peaceful life among multiple religions through the program of Dialogue Harmony. Dialogue Harmony is the interfaith dialogue program that involving the religion of Islam, Christian, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. Indeed, interfaith dialogue is one of the suitable approaches in consolidating understanding between different religions in Malaysia. In addition, this interfaith dialogue program is able to build unity and harmonize community with multiple backgrounds in order to appreciate and understand the concepts, culture and traditions of the adherents of other religions. Abdel Aziz Bergout (2008) explained that dialogue is an attempt to mature someone and be able to create an awareness of mutual respect. In addition, Azizan Baharudin (2008) says that dialogue is seen as a mechanism for reconciliation. While, Dina Badri (2004) cited that dialogue is one of the approaches to foster unity in our lives. In this way it can reduce misunderstanding among other religions and able to form moral values and respect for the beliefs of other religious adherents.

According to Ghazali Basri (2009) interfaith dialogue can be understood as the willingness and ability of any one religious group to give respond and reaction to any problem that has arisen whether the matter involves the group themselves or others and to create a condition by the means of two basic requirements must be met; the willingness of honesty and sincerity. This point of view is supported by Azizan Baharuddin et al (2005) that the real purpose of the dialogue has the potential to overcome negative perceptions and being honest and sincere. This is to ensure that there is no hidden agenda in every dialogue implied in each dialogue. In other words, the dialogue is not a missionary or mission for the purpose to change religion, but to create an attitude of respecting of people's beliefs, traditions, culture and customs of other religions in Malaysia.

Based on the above explanation, the panels of Dialogue Harmony on TV Al-Hijrah apply values like honesty and sincerity to public. Each panel representing their respective religion plays a huge role in giving understanding to the plural society in Malaysia. Religious

diversity in Malaysia is not a real problem to all of us, but it is a challenge for us to understand, appreciate, love, learn and recognize the uniqueness of the various races and religions in the country. On the other hand, Khatijah Mohd Khambali & Mohd Herzali Mohd Haled (2008) pointed out that positive approach should be taken in order to establish tolerance, unity and religious harmony in Malaysia, namely to appreciate similarities and differences that exist in every religion.

Apart from that, TV Al-Hijrah has taken proactive actions in delivering the message of other religions to the community of different races and belief to understand each other. Even at this early stage TV shows less viewers but the efforts towards this program is a positive efforts to attract Malaysians to be more open minded towards the concept of interfaith dialogue. But at the same time the researchers would like to emphasize that this Dialogue Harmony TV show should be seen positively because at least through interfaith dialogue program on television, we can start to care about other religions to build understanding, harmony and mutual respect. If this TV show is seen from negative point of view, then the sensitivity and tensions between religions will be always continue.

Therefore, the representative of each religion in the Dialogue Harmony program plays a role to convey message about the importance of living in harmony ways in the community of multiple religions. Khatijah Mohd Khambali & Mohd Herzali Mohd Haled (2008) explained that mass media and electronic media should serve as a platform for effective information and give understanding of other religions in Malaysia to all levels of society, especially for the young generation.

6. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, interfaith dialogues in Malaysia are currently gaining attention after the broadcasting of Dialogue Harmony. This indicates that through this program it is able to raise awareness to the people of various backgrounds about understanding and respecting other religions in Malaysia. In addition, this program can provide more explanations, understandings and able to reduce conflict between other religions in Malaysia. As a suggestion for the next study, the researchers proposes that study in quantitative form to be carried out by making the questionnaire to the audience after the following year of Dialogue Harmony program has been broadcasted. In addition, the researchers also recommend that the study in the form of content analysis is executed with the purpose to study the suitability of topic selection and contents presented in Dialogue Harmony among multiple races and religions in Malaysia.

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