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MALAY-EUROPEAN INTERFAITH DISCOURSE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

As a multiracial country, Malaysia faces pressing trans-religious issues that could lead to tensions and conflicts if not properly managed. While acknowledging the importance of interfaith discourse and interreligious relations, current initiatives taken are yet to achieve its intended aims due to resistance from certain segments of the Muslims that viewed those initiatives as a direct threat to the supremacy of Islam in the country. At the same time, it is found that not much consideration is given to the social and historical experiences of the local populace in this matter, especially in the periods prior to the 20th century. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the nature of historical and social encounters between the Malay-Muslims and European Christians in terms of their perception and attitude towards other religions; identify cases of interfaith discourse and analyse its socio-political settings; and asses the role of the rulers and *ulama* in influencing the direction of interfaith discourse among the Malays. It is hoped that this historical reconstruction will help enrich our understanding of the nature, issues, and challenges faced today and charting the future direction of the interfaith dialogue in the country.

Keywords: Dialogue; Islam; Christianity; Malaysia; Muslim.

Khulasah

Sebagai sebuah negara majmuk, Malaysia menghadapi pelbagai cabaran berkaitan isu rentas agama yang boleh menyebabkan konflik dan keresahan dalam masyarakat sekiranya tidak ditangani dengan sewajarnya. Walaupun peranan hubungan dan wacana antara agama tidak dinafikan kepentingannya, namun inisiatif sedia ada belum lagi dapat merealisasikan objektifnya dengan berkesan disebabkan tentangan daripada sesetengah segmen masyarakat Islam yang melihatnya sebagai ancaman kepada kedaulatan Islam di negara ini. Pada masa yang sama, tidak banyak perhatian yang diberikan kepada aspek pengalaman sosial dan sejarah masyarakat tempatan dalam hal ini, terutamanya pada era sebelum abad ke-20 Masihi. Justeru, makalah ini bertujuan untuk meneroka bentuk pertembungan antara orang Melayu beragama Islam dengan orang Eropah beragama Kristian mengenai persepsi dan sikap mereka terhadap agama lain, mengenal pasti kes-kes wacana antara agama yang berlaku, dan menganalisisnya dari perspektif sosial-politik yang melibatkan peranan pemerintah dan ulama dalam mengemudi hala tuju wacana antara agama dalam masyarakat. Diharapkan agar rekonstruksi sejarah ini dapat membantu memperkayakan pemahaman kita mengenai bentuk, isu dan cabaran yang dihadapi pada hari ini dalam menentukan haluan masa depan wacana antara agama di negara ini.

Kata kunci: Dialog; Islam; Kristian; Malaysia; Muslim.

Introduction

In Malaysia, the term *bumiputras* or 'sons of soil' refers specifically to the Malays and people of indigenous origin as the main ethnic group that constitute the bulk of its populace. The Constitution of Malaysia [Article 160(2)]

has defined a Malay as a person of Muslim faith, who speaks the Malay language and follows the Malay customs, in addition to certain residential requirements.[1] These are important identity markers that link religion to ethnicity, although it was not necessarily congruent with the beliefs and practices of the Malays prior to their adoption of Islam. As such, the demographic distribution of religious affiliation in the country also reflects this, more so in the case of Islam, where it represents 61.3% of the population followed by Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), Hinduism (6.3%) and others.[2] In this sense, Islam is made the religion of the Federation, but other religions may also be practiced in peace and harmony.

Outside the legal sphere, however, it is not always easy to determine the real connotation of the word 'Malay'. In fact, it is a term that is very fluid both in its usage and implication, as has been rightly described by Milner to mean 'different things in different places and at different times'.[3] Despite its connotation of a specific ethnic group that inhabits the Malay Peninsula and parts of Sumatera and Borneo, there are also cultural elements that could enable a person to 'become a Malay' (*masuk Melayu*) regardless of his ethnic background. In this regard, the definition set by the constitution of present-day Malaysia has clearly delineated this, as most of the requisites are cultural and not racial in nature.

At the same time, for the inhabitants of the maritime Malay Archipelago in the past, to 'become a Malay' was also meant to be civilised, that is by adopting the religion

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[1] *Federal Constitution* (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2010), 153.

[2] Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010: Updated 5th Aug 2011," https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php, accessed 3 Feb 2021.

[3] A. C. Milner, *The Malays* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2008), xi; and V. M. Hooker, *A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West* (New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 21-22.

of the Malays, their language as well as following their cultures. While this was mostly associated with the advent of Islam and its adoption by the Malays, there was also a rare case in some areas in the eastern part of the archipelago that associated it with Christianity as the bearer of civilisation. It was only much later during the colonial period that the concept of Malay as a specific race or ethnic group was localised in its context.[4]

With these considerations, the term Malay employed in this study refers to both its ethnic and cultural elements. In the earlier phase of their history, a general concept of the Malays as inhabitants of most parts of the maritime Malay Archipelago is employed due to their shared communalities as afore discussed. However, with the definitive demarcation of their territories that would give birth to two eventual nation-states and the subsequent cultural and social changes under the intensified colonial rule following the Anglo-Dutch London Treaty in 1824, a more restrictive use of the term Malay is adopted here to specifically denote the inhabitants of the various states in the Malay Peninsula, which constitute the present-day Malaysia, and towards a certain extent the island of Singapore.

It is also often perceived that the traditional and conservative outlook of the present-day Malay-Muslims has contributed much to their reluctance to engage with people of other faiths.[5] Nonetheless, various other factors contributed to the forming of such an attitude amongst them throughout recent years. The aftereffect of almost four decades of Islamic revivalism, political Islam and Islamisation policies in Malaysia have resulted in a

[4] A. C. Milner, *The Malays*, xi: 3-4; and N. Tarling ed., *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), iii. 516-517.

[5] A.E.M. Zain, J. Awang & I. Zakaria, “Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Perspective of Malaysian Contemporary Muslim Thinkers,” *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 5(1) (2014), 1-9.

significant increase of more conscious religious identity and adherence amongst the people, intertwining of religious and secular affairs in the public sphere, expansion of religious authority and bureaucracies, and restrictive understanding in defining the scope of orthodoxy, among others.[6] Moreover, as religion is intrinsically linked with race and politics, any attempts at negotiation or compromise of religious matters between various faith groups might be perceived as a threat to the identity and hegemony of the Malays as the *bumiputras*.[7]

It is worthwhile to note that the overzealousness of the Malays in protecting their identity and race is not merely a recent manifestation; rather it seems to have been ingrained in their history and culture as race is essentially linked with religion (Islam), and that the authority of both their religion and custom rests with their traditional ruler (*sultan*). It is in this sense that Marrison characterised the Malay as generally lacking in fanaticism due to his tolerance of other faiths, but 'tenacious of his Islam, seeing in it a bastion against the encroachment of other races'.[8]

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[6] G. Hoffstaedter, "Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: Can There be Dialogue?" in *Culture, Religion and Conflict in Muslim Southeast Asia: Negotiating Tense Pluralisms*, eds. J. Camilleri & S. Schottmann (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 43-46; A. S. Walters, "Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations: A Malaysian Christian Perspective," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 18(1) (2007), 67-83; and N. J. Funston, "The Politics of Islamic Reassertion: Malaysia," in *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia,* eds. A. Ibrahim, S. Siddique & Y. Hussain (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985), 171-179.

[7] K. S. Nathan, "Managing Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Malaysia: Implications for Public Policy and Social Transformation," in *Religion, Public Policy and Social Transformation in Southeast Asia,* ed. D. Sofjan (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2016), 48; and S. S. Faruqi, "The Malaysian Constitution, the Islamic State and Hudud Laws," in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century,* eds. K. S. Nathan & M. H. Kamali (Singapore: ISEAS, 2005), 259.

[8] G. E. Marrison, "Islam and the Church in Malaya: History of Islam in Malaya," *The Muslim World* 47(4) (1957), 292, 296.

Nonetheless, given the sporadic tensions and societal discords that sparked from various trans-religious issues; from religious conversions to theological disputations on the use of the word Allah for Christians, and topics concerning universal human rights such as gender, sexual identity and others,[9] it is without doubt that interfaith relation is a serious issue in the present-day Malay society of Malaysia that would have its impact on the religious harmony of the nation. Although several interfaith dialogue models and efforts were introduced by various organisations throughout the years, most have yet to achieve their intended aims due to the resistance from certain segments of the Malays that viewed those initiatives as a direct threat to the supremacy of Islam in the country.[10]

However, it is difficult to assume that the spirit of tolerance manifested through hundreds of years of interactions and experiences of the Malays with the people of various faiths and cultures in the region have not recorded any instances of interfaith exchange and intellectual encounters. This is especially significant considering the diversified and pluralistic nature of the society that characterises the Southeast Asian region from time immemorial. At the same time, the overall narrative on interfaith discourse amongst the Malays throughout their

[9] See for instance: D. Thomas ed., *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 418-420; P. C. Phan ed., *Christianities in Asia* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 88; P. G. Riddell, "Islamization, Civil Society and Religious Minorities," in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century,* eds. K. S. Nathan & M. H. Kamali (Singapore: ISEAS, 2005), 164-174, and others.

[10] See: Hoffstaedter, "Religious Pluralism", 54-64; W. S. W. Yusof & A. A. Majid, "Inter-Religious Dialogue Models in Malaysia," *Global Journal al-Thaqafah* 2(1) (2012), 7-13; R. Hunt, "Can Muslims Engage in Interreligious Dialogue? A Study of Malay Muslim Identity in Contemporary Malaysia," *The Muslim World* 99(4) (2009), 581-607.

history has yet to be aptly discussed, except in a few limited instances.[11]

Therefore, this paper aims to embark on this important but somewhat neglected topic. It attempts to explore the extent of openness and acceptance among the Malays on matters relating to religious exchanges and discourses with the European Christians throughout their history. In other words, does the Malay culture enable and tolerate the surfacing of the plurality of voices in theology after its adoption of Islam? In this regard, it is not only important to identify the actors involved in such interactions but also its underlying social and political perspectives. These historical episodes of exchanges provide an interesting window to an important aspect of the Malay culture hitherto not sufficiently discussed that would undoubtedly help in promoting a more positive outlook on the peaceful and meaningful interactions of people of various faiths that constitute the very fabric of the present-day plural Malaysian society.

Methodological Considerations

In attempting to reconstruct the historically thematic narrative as proposed, various instances of interfaith exchanges and discourses between the Malays and the Europeans are identified based on their relevant socio-

[11] Currently, Brill's *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* is the most comprehensive ongoing project that strives to discuss this subject from various perspectives. Yet, its discussions tend to be encyclopaedic and regional-based surveys in general. On the other hand, the interfaith discourse narrative in the Malay society as a topic has yet to be thematically reconstructed and sufficiently analysed, hence necessitating the discussion as presented here. Other relevant studies include P. G. Riddell, "Christians and Muslims in Southeast Asia: Attitudes Inherited, Transmitted, Consolidated and Challenged," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29(1) (2018), 21-36; K. A. Steenbrink, "Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the Writings of Nur al-Din al-Raniri," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 1(2) (1990), 192-207, among others.

political contexts. Issues relating to the nature of these exchanges are then analysed in terms of the perception and attitude of the Malays towards other religions, motives as well as the role of the rulers and *ulama* in influencing the direction of interfaith discourse in the society. Due to its nature, the study is mostly based on the textual and contextual analysis of selected relevant texts and literatures.

In this regard, despite the earlier interactions of the Malays with people of other faiths, the glaring lack of written accounts and extant records of the premodern period of their history has rendered further discussion on the matter almost futile. On the other hand, the focus on the Europeans is particularly due to the abundance of Western travel records and missionary accounts of voyages in the Malay World throughout the later centuries that constitute an indispensable source of information due to its vivid ethnographical narrations and descriptions of the history, culture, and behaviour of the native inhabitants. It is particularly due to this reason that the bulk of the literature examined in this study is predominantly limited to European sources rather than local or other sources in the Malay language.

At the same time, 'interfaith discourse' as a term in the context of present-day society, refers generally to any form of communication, exchange of ideas and beliefs among various faith groups on religious themes and identity that is characterised by genuine openness, mutual respect, and transparency. Its main purpose is to learn and understand each other as fellow members of a society and not merely as a tool for religious conversion or proving the superiority of one's belief over another in a particular issue.[12]

Yet, when applying it to the society in the period under study, it is apparent that the interfaith encounters and

[12] P. Admirand, "Humbling the Discourse: Why Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Pluralism, Liberation Theology, and Secular Humanism are Needed for a Robust Public Square," *Religions* 10(8) (2019), 450-461.

exchanges recorded were quite the opposite of what has been explicated in the current usage of the term. In many instances, the communications were clouded with certain a degree of prejudice and bias that aimed towards religious conversion and assertion of superiority of one's faith above the other. This was not only limited to exchanges between the proponents of the established religious traditions such as Islam and Christianity, but also encompassed the seemingly unstructured native systems of animistic belief and others. Similarly, dialogue was not the norm commonly employed during these encounters but mostly in the forms of debates, monologues and even extortions in subduing one's opponents. This appropriates the term 'interfaith discourse' as employed in this study rather than the oft-used 'interreligious dialogue'.[13]

Here, it is also important to note that while it might perhaps be tempting to analyse the impact of the orthodoxic and orthopraxic nature of religions on interfaith discourse, yet the very nature of these concepts and its application to Islam is somewhat problematic and confusing, making it unsuitable as a framework for discussion in this study. Unlike Christianity, which is fundamentally orthodoxic, Islam is not strictly orthodoxic or orthopraxic. While orthopraxy is integral to Islam, right belief or orthodoxy is essential in determining one's final salvation and destiny. In other words, neglecting religious practices in Islam may lead to sin, but it does not render a person an unbeliever. In this regard, scholars such as Calder, Wilson and others have recognised the problematic nature of imposing these and other Christian and Jewish religious models and terminologies on Islam. Despite its convenience in

[13] On interreligious dialogue and its requisites, see for instance: W. M. Watt, *Islamic Revelation in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), vii, 120-126.

simplifying Western discourse on Islamic societies, this imposition is not appropriate due to various reasons.[14]

Moreover, the limited and concise nature of the recorded instances of interreligious exchanges has also rendered it difficult to delve in detail into the intricate purposes and motives of its perpetrators other than what is observable at the societal and political levels. Nonetheless, it is still thought to be an endeavour that is valuable and worthwhile to be further explicated for a more thorough understanding of the subject matter discussed albeit in a more general manner.

Two Phases of Malay-European Interfaith Discourse

In this study, the recorded instances of interfaith exchanges are further analysed according to their specific epoch, namely the early modern and colonial rule prior to the birth of the modern nation-states in the twentieth century. In this regard, the periodisation as suggested here is predominantly determined by the salient features of each era in terms of politics, economics, and society alongside the important issue of the availability of historical tools relevant to the theme under discussion during each period. It does not necessarily entail progression or development but rather signifies a shift of social reality effected by the significant changes in political and economic dynamism of human interactions.

i. Early Contact: The Early Modern Period (1500s-1700s)

The coming of the Portuguese to the eastern isles has, in many ways, changed the political, economic, and social

[14] For further discussion on this subject, see: M. Brett Wilson, "The Failure of Nomenclature: The Concept of 'Orthodoxy' in the Study of Islam," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3(2) (2007), 169-194; Norman Calder, "The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy," in *Defining Islam: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Rippin (New York: Routledge, 2014), 222-236, and others.

dynamics of the region and prompted the rise of a new age of unprecedented competition, confrontation and compromise between the natives and the Europeans. For once, the Portuguese, fuelled by their desire to wrest trade monopoly from the Muslim merchants, had embarked on voyages to the east and conquered Goa and several cities in India from 1498 onwards. Later, their venture into Melaka led to the conquest of the Malay-Muslim city-port in 1511, thus ending the golden age of the Malay polity in the Malay Peninsula.[15] On the site of the grand mosque of Melaka, a new fortress was built, and churches were also erected in the city.[16]

However, except for several islands in the Moluccas, the Portuguese were not very successful in evangelising the Malays in Melaka and elsewhere. In 1515, the vicar of Melaka requested more learned men as the inhabitants were said to be of ‘subtle intelligence and difficult to convert’. Generally, the Hindus were more receptive towards conversion while only a handful of Muslims converted, not out of conviction of the truth of Christianity, but rather for pragmatic causes such as evading slavery, marriage, and others.[17] For the Malays, their negative attitude towards the Christians, which was inherited from the earlier interreligious conflicts in the Arab world, had prompted them to perceive the Portuguese not only as a political and economic rival but more importantly as the enemy of Islam.

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[15] J. S. Aritonang & K. A. Steenbrink, eds., *A History of Christianity in Indonesia* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 9-13.

[16] G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times,* 4 vols. (Rome: The Jesuit Historical Institute, 1980), iii. 9-11; I. A. Macgregor, “Notes on the Portuguese in Malaya,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)* 28(2) (1955), 39; and J. V. Mills, “Eredia’s Description of Malaca, Meridional India, and Cathay,” *JMBRAS* 8/1 (1930), 21.

[17] G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier*, iii. 19-22. See also J. Crawfurd, *History of the Indian Archipelago,* 3 vols (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1820), ii. 273.

Thus, religious identity reinforced the intricate rivalry between the native self and the conquering others as a symbol of resistance towards the European power.[18]

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the Dutch had also begun their commercial venture into the Malay Archipelago through the Dutch East India Company (VOC). In their attempts to secure and monopolise the spice trade, the VOC was granted the charter to wage war, build fortifications, and make treaties with the local polities. However, compared with the Portuguese, the Dutch initially had little interest in evangelisation, especially among the Malays and Muslims. It was only much later that the role of religion was perceived as significant although not a decisive role in curbing the advances of the Muslims.[19]

As such, the general outlook of religious affairs in this period is characterised by severe competition, race and hostilities between Islam and Christianity in which political and economic motives as well as burgeoning literary activities sparked religious prejudice and suspicion on both sides.[20] Military conflict and political resistance against foreign control would later take a serious religious tone and be perceived as *jihad* to protect one's homeland from the rule of the infidels.[21] Nonetheless, this critical period of Islamisation and Christianisation, especially throughout the

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[18] P. G. Riddell, "Christians and Muslims in Southeast Asia," 25-29; and R. A. Hunt, *Islam in Southeast Asia: A Study for Christians* (New York: GBGM Books, 1997), 20.

[19] K. A. Steenbrink, "No (longer) Fear, but Control and Care. Europeans and Muslims in South East Asia, 17th and 18th Centuries," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Volume 12 Asia, Africa and the Americas (1700-1800)*, eds. D. Thomas & J. Chesworth (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 483.

[20] P. G. Riddell, "Christians and Muslims in Southeast Asia," 25-29.

[21] As such, jihad literatures are excluded from the scope of this paper due to the underlying political tone that prompted such call to mobilise support of the masses in military campaigns. See: P. G. Riddell, "Christians and Muslims in Southeast Asia," 25-30.

1550s-1650s, has contributed to the intensification of the expansion and consolidation of Islam throughout the Malay Archipelago.[22]

Due to this, Christianity was increasingly perceived as a religion of the foreign conquerors, while Islam was a protector against this foreign invasion.[23] Despite the high point of Muslim-Christian polarisation in this period, there was also a significant increase in cases of tolerance and interfaith exchanges among adherents of both religions.[24] Apparently, the 'Malayan tribes' dubbed by Crawfurd as the 'most exemplary Mohamedans of the Archipelago' were 'sufficiently strict without being intolerant' even in facing the Portuguese and Spanish who 'were deeply tinctured with the religious frenzy, bigotry, and intolerance of their age and nations'.[25]

The rise of Aceh as a potent regional power in the seventeenth century served to fill in the void of native authority and commercial influence after the fall of Melaka. In many ways, Aceh positioned itself as an heir to the *sultanate* of Melaka, not only by promoting the standard of Malayness established in Melaka earlier but also by contributing to its enhancement, especially in the domains of literature and court administration and behaviour. Thus, Islam was considered an integral aspect of secular and religious life and *ulama* were given dignified ranks in the government, which were modelled on the Ottoman system.[26]

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[22] A. Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 151-152; N. Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, i. 333.

[23] J. T. Addison, *The Christian Approach to the Moslem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 235.

[24] P. G. Riddell, "Christians and Muslims in Southeast Asia," 32.

[25] J. Crawfurd, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, ii. 273-274.

[26] L. Y. Andaya, "Aceh's Contribution to Standards of Malayness," *Archipel* 61(1) (2001), 33, 45-51.

In fact, it was the policy of the *Sultanate* of Aceh throughout the sixteenth century to adopt the Islam-or-death ultimatum on European Christians perceived as its enemy. While this practice was entirely against the precept of dialogue with the people of the book enjoined in the Qur'an and the generally tolerant attitude associated with the Malays, its application in the Acehnese milieu is most probably linked with the Turkish influence in its court. [27] At the same time, the rise of Aceh as a centre for Islamic learning in the region coincided with the appearance and proliferation of religious literature in Malay produced within its cultural milieu. Despite the mention of some titles during the earlier period of Melaka, the earliest extant manuscript known is an interlinear Malay translation of a manual in creed for Muslims on the rudiments of faith and its requirements, and not a polemical work on comparative religion.[28]

In general, it was a political motive and actor who dominated religion and *ulama* in directing interfaith discourse and interaction, and pragmatic considerations rather than theological verity determined its intended outcome.[29] A similar attitude is also found to be adopted by

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[27] See for instance the debate between Frederick de Houtman and the Acehnese in K. A. Steenbrink, "Frederick de Houtman," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Volume 11 South and East Asia, Africa and the Americas 1600-1700*, eds. D. Thomas & J. Chesworth (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 321-5; A. Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*, 173-174.

[28] A. S. Ahmad, ed., *Sulalatus Salatin [The Malay Annals]* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1979), 146-147: 189; and S. M. N. al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the 'Aqa'id of al-Nasafi* (Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya, 1988), 9.

[29] See for instance the episode encountered by Sir James Lancaster in C. R. Markham, ed., *The Voyages of Sir James Lancaster to the East Indies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94-98; and S. Purchas, *His Pilgrimage* (London: William Stansby, 1614), 548-549. The copy of the Qur'an is now kept in the collection of the Rotterdam

the successor of Melaka in the Malay Peninsula. By the order of the ruler of Johor, a copy of the Qur'an was presented by Chief *Mufti* or *Qadi* to the Dutch commander, Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge. It is said that the ruler had believed that Matelieff would treat it with respect and that there was a missionary motive behind such a move.[30] However, it is perhaps more appropriate to view this as an implicit symbolism of goodwill to augment the shared elements of religious traditions between Islam and Christianity as a strong basis for further cooperation between them against their common enemy; the Portuguese, as previously done in Aceh. In other words, by enhancing their shared history of religious traditions, the ruler of Johor had hoped that the Dutch would be more sympathetic to his cause for the mutual benefit of both parties.

Thus, the role of *ulama* as an advisor in the royal court seemed to be somewhat limited, and the final say always belonged to the political will and strategic wisdom of the ruler. It is perhaps in this context that the first known treatise on comparative religion in Malay entitled *al-Tibyan fi Maʻrifat al-Adyan* (*Clarification on the Knowledge of Religions*) by Nur al-Din al-Raniri; the *Shaykh al-Islam* of Aceh in 1637-1644, serves to confirm the main Islamic dogma of the unity of God for internal Muslim readership rather than defending it from the doctrine of Christianity.[31] As matters relating to foreign policies rested solely with the *sultan*, he might have to be careful enough to avoid discussing interfaith relations in a way that would interfere

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Municipal Library. See: P. G. Riddell, "Rotterdam Ms 96 D 16: The Oldest Known Surviving Qur'an from the Malay World," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 30(86) (2002), 9-20.

[30] B. W. Andaya, "Islam and Christianity in South-East Asia 1600-1700," in *Christian-Muslim Relations 1500-1900*, ed. D. Thomas, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2451-9537_cmrii_COM_30306, 14 October 2020).

[31] K. A. Steenbrink, "Jesus and the Holy Spirit," 198-204.

with state affairs and offend his political master. Thus, a safer way was to concentrate on the intra-faith strife between him and the so-called pantheists (*wujudiyyah*) in which this treatise helps to augment the variety of his viewpoint in a series of his other polemical works against his opponents. In this regard, it is perhaps reasonable not to overestimate its impact and contribution to the interfaith discourse at that time.

On the other hand, in less hostile situations where Europeans were not perceived as a political threat to Muslim rule, a more peaceful and tolerant policy was found to be adopted towards them, in which race and religion did not weigh much as concerning factors. Perhaps this can be seen from the policies of Queen Safiyyat al-Din Shah (r. 1641-1675) in Aceh who demonstrated a friendly attitude towards the Dutch by emphasising the shared religious root of Islam and Christianity.[32] It was also in a similar situation that Abdullah Mukarram Shah (r. 1778-1798); the *sultan* of Kedah, had kindly allowed Bishop Conde and Father Arnaud Garnault to establish a parish stronghold for the colony of Roman Catholic refugees from Siam nearby Kuala Kedah on 7 November 1781.[33]

Outside the political realm, there were also cases of interfaith discourse during this period that occurred out of intellectual curiosity and initiated by both political and social actors such as the ruler, *ulama*, nobilities and others perhaps to understand the other's faith and culture. Interestingly, even the uncompromising policy of the Aceh *sultanate* did not hamper the *sultan* from allowing the Augustinian friars to hold a mass which he and his sons

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[32] S. B. Khan, *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: The Sultanahs of Aceh 1641-1699* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 179-180.

[33] M. Rerceretnam, "Intermarriage in Colonial Malaya and Singapore: A Case Study of Nineteenth-and early Twentieth-century Roman Catholic and Methodist Asian Communities," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43/2 (2012), 310.

attended, perhaps to witness in person the rituals of the Catholics and satisfy his curiosity.[34]

At the more mundane level, a similar attitude of openness is also found among the Malays. John Smith, an English adventurer appointed as the envoy for the Queen of Patani, narrated briefly of his encounter with a local Malay chief in the jungle of Perak and the conversations they had on various theological issues including the question of Jesus, perhaps to satisfy their curiosity of one another's belief. Unfortunately, only this much of the event is known, but it seems that it might take the form of a casual dialogue between them without apparent political or missionary motives.[35]

In short, the cases of interfaith discourses during this period were consistent with the spirit of the age that was characterised by the intensified rivalry, enmity, and race between Islam and Christianity. However, as has been shown, many of these hostile policies or attitudes were essentially politically motivated in which religion was utilised to accentuate the differences among them hence justifying punishment, execution, and war against the rivals. Yet, in other situations where politics did not pose a major issue, a more genuine facet of interfaith discourses can be observed that arose out of curiosity or simply to enhance one's understanding of the other. Thus, it is this seemingly conflicting image of Islam-Christian relations of this period between tension and tolerance that rendered it to be characterised as ambiguous.[36]

ii. Submission and Compromise: The Colonial Period (1800s-mid 1900s)

In the nineteenth century, the increasing presence of the British in the region in the quest for economic dominance

[34] B. W. Andaya, "Islam and Christianity,".
[35] A. Hale, *The Adventures of John Smith in Malaya 1600-1605* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1909), 221-2.
[36] B. W. Andaya, "Islam and Christianity,".

had only escalated severe competition between them and the Dutch on matters relating to territorial disputes, trading jurisdictions, and other complexities arising from their relations with the local Malay rulers. In this regard, the 1824 Anglo-Dutch London Treaty was monumental, not only in terms of solving the disputes between these two major European powers but most importantly in disrupting the traditional authority of the Johor-Riau *Sultanate* and effecting a lasting partitioning of the Malay Archipelago through the Straits of Melaka that would establish the political boundaries of the modern-day Malaysia and Indonesia. It was in this sense that a 'new world' was created, which was characterised by the encroaching intervention and dominance of the British over the Malay polities in the Malay Peninsula throughout the following decades.[37]

In 1826, the British settlements of Melaka, Penang, Province Wellesley, and Singapore were consolidated into a single administrative unit called the Straits Settlements and placed under the direct British authorities. The multiracial inhabitants of these cities under British rule exuded the characteristics of an egalitarian and liberal cosmopolitan society as compared with the existing Malay polities under the *sultan*. Yet, the British government, despite not formally sponsoring or launching proselytising missions for the natives, was nevertheless, indirectly sympathetic to the independent Christian missionary activities.[38]

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[37] A. Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 241-242; and B. W. Andaya & L. Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 115-122.

[38] J. Roxborough, "Contextualisation and Re-contextualisation: Regional Patterns in the History of Southeast Asian Christianity," *Asia Journal of Theology* 9(1) (1995), 30-46; K. S. Nathan, "Managing Ethnic and Religious Diversity," 43; and F. T. Ying, "Evangelist at the Gate: Robert Morrison's Views on Mission," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 63/2 (2012), 309.

A more formal relationship between Britain and the other Malay states was only actualised in the latter part of the nineteenth century through the 1874 Pangkor Treaty, and later the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty. In this new model of political intervention, the Malay rulers must accept the 'advice' of a British Resident and/or Advisor on all strategic matters. The role of the Malay rulers was greatly relegated to mere ceremonials, except on matters relating to Islam and the Malay custom. In this regard, it was implicitly understood that missionary activities amongst the Malays were generally off-limits and that church services to be confined to the Europeans and non-Malays.[39] In a way, this policy has helped in reinforcing the Malay identity with religion, and despite their tolerance with people of different faiths, any convert to Christianity or other religion would be regarded as a renegade and traitor in the eyes of the people due to this social bond.[40] As such, in manoeuvring the changes brought about by colonialism throughout this period, it is interesting to analyse the attitude of the Malays towards interfaith discourse both within the liberal environment of the British rule as well as the more traditional Malay rule.

The Straits Settlements

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the London Missionary Society (LMS) was particularly significant in its evangelisation role amongst the Malays, especially through the publication and distribution of the scriptures in the vernacular and education on literacy with the aid of catechism and the Bible.[41] Thus, the persuasive and peaceful approach of the Protestants towards evangelisation

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[39] B. W. Andaya & L. Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 154-155; J. Roxborough, "Contextualisation and Re-contextualisation," 30-46.

[40] G. E. Marrison, "Islam and the Church in Malaya," 292, 296.

[41] L. O'Sullivan, "The London Missionary Society: A Written Record of Missionaries and Printing Presses in the Straits Settlements 1815-1847," *JMBRAS* 57(2) (1984), 61.

in this period was markedly different from the earlier vicious policies of military confrontations associated with the Catholic Portuguese. The change of attitude also meant that more avenues of engagements and exchanges between religions would take place although these also depended on the attitude and reception of the people themselves.

In 1815, LMS opened a mission in Melaka followed by Singapore and Penang in 1819. Printing also began in Melaka with works primarily in Chinese and some in Malay were produced. The Malay section in Melaka was undertaken by Claudius Henry Thomsen with the assistance of Munshi Abdullah, a Malay scribe of Indian origin. In 1817, the first Malay books published in Melaka were *The Ten Commandments* and Dr. Watts' *First Catechism*. However, the complete translation of the New Testament in Malay was only accomplished by B.P. Keasberry and Munshi Abdullah much later in 1853. Due to the difficulties of converting the Malays, the missionaries concentrated most of their efforts on the local Chinese.[42]

It is worthwhile to note the significant role of Munshi Abdullah in the translation and publication of the Bibles in Malay. While his sincerity and truthfulness in these works remained suspicious in the eyes of some of the missionaries, his role in the mission was influential in ensuring the legibility of the translated scriptures for the native readers.[43] His openness and eagerness to learn and engage with the missionaries on some doctrinal issues of Christianity was also perceived as controversial among the Malays who generally treated the missionaries 'with extreme suspicion and enmity' and even with insult and

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[42] L. O'Sullivan, "The London Missionary Society," 61-72; R. A. Hunt, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, 53-55; A. T. Gallop, "Early Malay Printing: An Introduction to the British Library Collections," *JMBRAS* 63(1) (1990), 96.

[43] R. A. Hunt, "The History of the Translation of the Bible into Bahasa Malaysia," *JMBRAS* 62(1) (1989), 40.

possibility of injury.[44] His persistence in working with the missionaries had also earned him the nickname ‘Padre Abdullah’ despite his persistence as a devout Muslim throughout his life. Outside the missionary circle, he also engaged some of his European friends in various theological issues such as polygamy, the trinity, the status of Jesus, and others.[45] It appears that the outcome of these conversations and exchanges was not aimed at religious conversion or establishing the superiority of one’s faith above another, but rather serving as an avenue for learning about each other’s faith with mutual respect in a cordial and non-polemical manner.

At the same time, the early missionaries’ efforts to establish schools in Melaka and Singapore for elementary education failed to attract the enrolment of the Malay students. Perhaps, the strong evangelical tone of these schools raised some concern with the Muslims out of fear of being Christianised. Yet, when such schools were operated by a respectable Malay haji and his friends in Melaka in 1831, they managed to attract a considerable number of Malay students despite using similar Christian books for English instructions.[46] This indicates that the resistance shown towards these schools was not necessarily religious in nature but related to the perception of the Malays towards the Europeans in general. In other words, the doctrinal aspect of Christianity did not in itself pose a threat to the Malay faith, but lack of trust in the motive and intention of the European missionaries-teachers aggravated

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[44] A.C. Milner, “Notes on C. H. Thomsen: Missionary to the Malays,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 9(25) (1981), 47; J. H. Haines, *A History of Protestant Missions in Malaya during the Nineteenth Century 1815-1881* (PhD Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1962), 176.

[45] A. H. Hill, “The Hikayat Abdullah,” *JMBRAS* 28(3) (1955), 115; J. T. Thomson, *Some Glimpses into Life in the Far East* (London: Richardson & Company, 1864), 326-332.

[46] L. O’Sullivan, “The London Missionary Society,” 85-129.

the perceived general prejudice towards the Europeans as colonisers who aimed at patronising and changing their inherited Malay identity and culture.

Of all the Straits Settlements at that time, it was in Penang that interesting cases of interfaith discourse and exchange took place, especially through the relentless activism of Thomas Beighton in spreading the messages of the gospel amongst the locals.[47] Apart from his active involvement in the composition and printing of religious texts in Malay, his biggest achievement was in the opening of missionary schools for the Malays. Through a formal educational institution, he was able to gain access and preach freely to the native Muslims. At the same time, he made sure that only Christian books could be used in the school, thus providing ready access to the scriptures to his students. Nonetheless, the actual religious conversion that took place was too abysmal a number to be considered a success as only about eighteen Muslim converts were recorded throughout the twenty-six years of his career.[48]

The first Malay school was met with fierce resistance from the Muslims. In countering this, a written document was circulated explaining the real motive of such a school, which is to provide basic education on literacy. Perhaps, the exaggerated response by the Malays was due to the striking difference between the Qur'anic educational system they were used to and the new schooling system of the missionaries. Then came the controversy of books to be used in the school; the Malays favoured learning the Qur'an, while the missionaries obviously intended to use only the Gospel and Christian religious works. Yet, by selecting nonpolemical parables, the commotion subsided,

[47] Anon, "Accounts from the Missions," *The Indo-Chinese Gleaner* 7, April 1819, 116.

[48] Anon, "A Sketch of the Life and Labours of the Rev. T. Beighton," *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* (April 1845), 169-174.

but at the same time, murmurs of the proselytising aim of the missionaries persisted.[49]

Beighton persevered in spreading the Christian scriptures and religious tracts in Malay in the hope of arousing the interest of the Muslims. However, several works he published caused controversies at that time due to their polemical and prejudiced tone. While said to be 'ignorant of Islam', yet his tracts were deliberately composed to rouse the attention of the Muslims, and indeed many of them corresponded with him regarding his works.[50] These included his *Tamthil*; a work comparing the basic tenets of Christianity with that of Islam, *Circumcision and Baptism* as a response to a conversation on the subjects that he had with a Muslim, and several others. The local Muslims were so grievously offended by his works that they complained to S.G. Bonham, the Governor of Penang, against him. Their letter stated the main cause of their grievance was the 'things very vile and atrocious are suggested against the sublime prophet, Mohamet, who is described as an imposter and deceiver and a lying prophet'. Following a meeting with the Governor, Beighton issued an open letter to the Muslims stating that his intention was not to offend but rather to 'stimulate enquiry'.[51]

At the same time, some leading Malays also sent him a large work composed specifically to refute some of his offensive claims. Despite his acknowledgement of the 'well

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[49] T. Beighton, "Penang: Description of the Island, and Christian Missions, Their Establishment, Progress, and Present State," *The Chinese Repository Volume 3* (Canton: Printed for the Proprietors, 1835), 223-225.

[50] For example, in 1837 he published a one-page tract on the Ten Commandments as a reaction to a criminal case involving a sayyid in Penang at that time. See: L. O'Sullivan, "The London Missionary Society," 76, 91-92.

[51] The letter is written in Malay and the quotation of the translated text is taken from: J. H. Haines, *A History of Protestant Missions*, 308-309.

thought out’ arguments presented in the work, Beighton did not attempt to answer them back. Similarly, a ‘high priest’ in Province Wellesley was also concerned with Beighton’s works and had been corresponding with him on religious matters. In fact, his commitment to analysing the missionary’s book took much of his time ‘reading it till midnight, sometimes sitting, and sometimes reclining on his mat’ to write his own tract in countering the arguments forwarded. When Beighton visited him, a public dialogue was cordially held between them on theological issues such as the superiority of Jesus to all prophets and others.[52] Unfortunately, only this much is known of these works, thus eliminating further analysis of their content. Yet it was mainly through written discourses that interfaith issues took place and stimulated further oral debates and dialogues.

Interestingly, Beighton was also involved in a high-profile interfaith exchange with Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah, the exiled ruler of Kedah during the Kedah-Siam war period. Earlier in 1821, he met the ruler in his residence in Kedah and gave him a copy of the New Testament in Malay, which he judged as being partially appropriate to Islam but not as a whole. Later they met again when he was exiled to Penang, and a more cordial relationship blossomed between them. The *sultan* showed a fervent interest in Christianity by visiting the mission and attending a religious service at the chapel. Once, his men even remarked that ‘were the King again on his throne and I would go inside there, all the people would believe the Gospel and if any were unruly the King would chastise them and make them believe’ to show his support of the missionary cause.[53]

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[52] J. T. Beighton, *Betel-Nut Island* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1888), 107-108.

[53] A. C. Milner, “The Sultan and the Missionary,” *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics and Strategic Studies* 9(2-3) (1979), 1-15; R. L. O’Sullivan, *A History of the London Missionary Society in the*

Despite his efforts, the *sultan* failed in his attempt to return to his state. It was only much later that he was reinstated, and by that time, both were old, and they passed away not long afterward. Perhaps, the interest shown by the *sultan* towards Christianity and its mission might have been a matter of curiosity and even religious enquiry, yet there was also a strong political motive at play especially considering Beighton's proximity to the British officials in Penang and his efforts in lobbying for his friend, which might have prompted such actions.

The Federated and Unfederated Malay States

The more traditional and conservative Malay states under the rule of the *sultans* have also recorded instances of interfaith exchanges with the Europeans, especially in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Yet, with the consolidation of colonial rule, religious matters became the prerogative right of the *sultans*, and proselytising missions to the Malays were generally shunned to avoid unnecessary conflict with them. However, responses to these exchanges varied depending on the socio-political condition of each state.

During his excursion in May 1828 to what would be the state of Negeri Sembilan today, Reverend Tomlin had recounted his encounters with several Malay dignitaries and religious leaders in villages of Linggi, Jempol and others who readily accepted Christian tracts in Malay and encouraged their followers to read them. Some were even interested to engage in interfaith dialogue, apparently not focusing much on creed, but rather on the shared elements between both religions such as the account of Nimrod, among others.[54] These encounters that took place with the local chiefs and dignitaries could perhaps be best

Straits Settlements (c. 1815-1847) (PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 1986), 144-145.

[54] J. Tomlin, *Missionary Journals and Letters* (London: James Nisbet and Co, 1844), 69-70, 77-78, 87-90.

understood as an amiable diplomatic gesture with the British rather than a genuine theological inquiry. This might explain the sharing of the story of Nimrod that exists in the traditions of both religions as an implicit way to express a mutual sense of belonging to forge a better cooperation in the future.

On the other hand, some rulers were markedly skeptical and distrustful of the intention of the European missionaries. For instance, during his trip to Pahang in 1828, Walter Medhurst was prohibited from travelling to the interior of the state and meeting with the Malays. Perhaps the presence of European missionaries was perceived as a form of threat that could potentially disrupt the local political and religious dynamism. Interestingly, his encounters with some Malays who lived in the Chinese villages were filled with 'very long arguments' that could not have been accomplished within the *sultan*'s political sphere of influence.[55]

On the contrary, Johor has exemplified an extraordinary case of interfaith engagement and tolerance as shown by its ruler Abu Bakar. Not only that he permitted the Catholics to build several churches and missions in his state, but he was also resolute in meeting Pope Leo XIII in the Vatican on 24 April 1885.[56] This is significant as it demonstrates the recognition of the papacy towards a Muslim ruler who displayed a willingness to engage and tolerate the needs of the Christians. Perhaps, Abu Bakar's friendly attitude towards the Christians was mostly due to

[55] American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission, "Proceedings of the London Missionary Society in Malacca," *The Missionary Herald* 25 (1829), 394.

[56] A. Candilio & L. Bressan, "Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore's Visit to the Italian King and the Pope in 1885," *JMBRAS* 73(1) (2000), 47-52.

his prior education under the preacher Keasberry in Singapore, whom he greatly respected.[57]

Nonetheless, the most important and significant case of interfaith discourse at that time took place in 1828 between Sultan Abdul Rahman of Terengganu and Walter Medhurst. The missionary, on his journey to Patani, had stopped by Terengganu twice. During his first visit, he met with the *sultan*, who showed a fervent interest in comparative religion and enquired about the missionary's knowledge of the religion of the Chinese especially on matters relating to the judgement day and the afterlife.[58]

During his second visit, the *sultan* seemed to have been more prepared to delve into a more serious theological discussion with the missionary. Altogether they spent two hours discussing Chinese feasts and customs and in particular the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Later, the *sultan* invited Medhurst and the Chinese to another session of debate. His followers were also present together with the learned and *ulama* and they raised the issue of idol worship, prophethood of Confucius and his works. Questions on Christian belief were also raised, especially on the creation of the world, the origin of man, and the status of Jesus. However, Medhurst averted to answer to avoid arguing on the matter.[59]

The *sultan* also produced a Malay translation of the New Testament and further asked about the validity of the laws of Moses after the coming of Jesus. The Malays also enquired about the real purpose of the coming of Jesus, and upon hearing the answer given by Medhurst that he was 'to save sinners, by dying on the cross for their transgressions,

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[57] A. R. T. Abdullah, "Sultan Abu Bakar's Foreign Guests and Travels Abroad, 1860s-1895: Fact and Fiction in Early Malay Historical Accounts," *JMBRAS* 84(1) (2011), 17-19.

[58] W. H. Medhurst, "Journal of a Voyage up the East Coast of the Malayan Peninsula," *Transactions of the Missionary Society* 53 & 54 (1830), 154-156.

[59] W. H. Medhurst, "Journal of a Voyage," 171.

and bearing their sins in his own body on the tree’, one of the Malays admonished him with the Islamic belief on the matter. Expectedly, Medhurst was quick to reject this, and with that no more questions were raised, thus concluding the discourse.[60]

These incidences were remarkable as they depicted the openness and willingness of the Malays to engage with people of other faiths, especially considering the traditional nature of the Malay states on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula and its homogenous predominant Malay population. Interestingly, the voice of the *ulama* was outshined by that of the *sultan* who orchestrated the whole discourse. In fact, these exchanges were mostly fuelled by the genuine interest of the ruler in knowing and understanding the religions of the others, the Chinese merchant community in the state on one hand, and the European Christians on the other as his potential ally in commerce and politics.

This might explain his disparaging attitude towards the Chinese who were his subjects, and their religious tradition which was perceived as inferior to his own faith. At the same time, his approach towards Christianity was quite the opposite. Many a time he portrayed both Islam and Christianity as similar and attempted to appropriate Christian doctrine with Muslim belief regarding Jesus. When confronted by Medhurst, he apparently avoided provoking the missionary and ended the discourse. The nature of these discourses as recorded in Terengganu were in the forms of open dialogue and friendly debate yet with the unmistakable tone of establishing the superiority of one’s faith above the other, which was commonplace at that time.

In discussing the establishment of printing and the rapid outburst of Christian religious tracts and scriptures in Malay from Melaka, Singapore, and Penang, it has been

[60] W. H. Medhurst, “Journal of a Voyage,” 172-173.

thought that the learned amongst the Malays and their *ulama* might have been alarmed by this new development hitherto unknown to them and triggered some form of reactions and responses.[61] However, it is pertinent to note that apart from the responses and reactions of the locals as afore discussed, most Malay *ulama* and authors at that time seemed oblivious to the theological polemics brought by some missionaries to the Malay societies. The religious works produced were thematically similar to the earlier period where subjects of creed, jurisprudence and Sufism dominated the discourse.

Even in creed, the focus was to elucidate the fundamentals of faith for internal consumption by the Muslims, and almost no work in comparative religion was produced. Perhaps an exception to this is the work attributed to the famed Arshad al-Banjari (d. 1812) entitled *Tuhfat al-Raghibin* (*A Gift for the Concerned*) on the issues of blasphemy and apostasy. In doing so, he discussed the 72 misguided sects and ideologies and their implications for one's faith.[62] In many ways, this work echoes the earlier treatise on the same subject by al-Raniri as discussed before, but interestingly it lacks any mention of Christianity or other religious ideologies. It is possible that since Christianity was not only perceived as alien to the cultural identity of the Malays but also not an attractive choice of conversion for them, it was not seen as a threat that warranted immediate responses from the *ulama*.

Yet, in a way, this has also had its impact on the readiness of the Malays to engage in interfaith exchanges with the others. Rarely that one's familiarity and knowledge of the other's faith, apart from his confidence in

[61] R. L. O'Sullivan, *A History of the London Missionary Society*, 284.

[62] Anon, *Tuhfat al-Raghibin fi Bayan Haqiqat Iman al-Mu'minin wa ma yufsiduh min riddat al-Murtaddin* [A Gift for the Concerned in Expositing the Truth of Faith for the Believers and Its Nullification due to Apostasy] (Singapore: al-Nahdi Press, n.d.).

the truth of his own religion prompt his positive attitude toward other religions as aptly demonstrated by Munshi Abdullah. But for most of the Malays and the so-called 'Hajies' at that time who portrayed an outward appearance of piety and learnedness in Islamic theology, they simply refused to engage with the Christians and even to read their books.[63]

Arguably, their attitude in this matter was due to the lack of exposure to polemical issues presented by the missionaries as well as the obvious gap in the Malay Islamic literature on this subject as discussed. Thus, apart from the ruler, *ulama* and these learned few, most of the laymen were found to be somewhat oblivious to the details of their own religion.[64] Thus, it is hardly surprising that any attempt to engage in interfaith discourse with such individuals would only prove to be awkward and even futile.[65]

On the other hand, the Christian missionaries were somewhat trained and prepared to undertake their proselyting missions seriously. Despite their general incompetence of the local vernacular and prejudiced assumptions on the teachings of Islam, they were at least equipped with guides in repudiating the arguments of their opponents in polemical discourses, although not much is known of the extent of its utilisation and impact by the missionaries in the context of the Malay society.[66]

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[63] A. C. Milner, "Notes on C.H. Thomsen," 47.

[64] See: R. J. Wilkinson, *The Peninsular Malays I: Malay Beliefs* (London: Luzac & Co, 1906), 7-16; R. L. O'Sullivan, *A History of the London Missionary Society*, 156; and others.

[65] See for instance: F. A. Swettenham, *Malay Sketches* (London: John Lane, 1900), 190-191.

[66] See: N. N, "Mohammedanism: Its Present Attitude in Eastern and Western Asia, with an Outline of a Defense of the Gospel against the Malayan Mohammedans," *The Chinese Repository Volume 3* (Canton: Printed for the Proprietors, 1835), 161-171.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, increasing contact and exchange between the Malay World and the Middle East has resulted in the intensified transmission of Islamic thinking and ideals that were linked with the major developments taking place in the Islamic heartlands.[67] To a certain extent, the religious identity of the Malays was also increasingly inclined towards Islamic orthodoxy, with the pre-Islamic elements slowly diminishing.

Compared with the earlier periods, the Malays at this time were described as ‘strict Mussulmen’ and ‘the most rigid of monotheists’ who observed the laws of the religion and lived by the rule of faith and practice. They have also presented ‘a compact front against Christianity and have successfully resisted all missionary enterprise’.[68] In this regard, despite the fervent interest shown by some missionaries such as William Shellabear and others to build a deeper relationship with the Malays through engagement with their traditional literary works, Christianity as a religion did not successfully gain a strong foothold amongst them.[69]

Moreover, the intrinsic confluence of race and religious identity that characterised the demographic profile of the Malay Peninsula has further complicated interfaith relations in recent times especially when it touches upon matters relating to race and religious politics. Thus, hostility and overzealousness in ‘protecting’ one’s religion against the other are usually seen from the morbid perspective of zero-sum gain where an apparent

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[67] P. G. Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2001), 192.

[68] I. L. Bird, *The Golden Chersonese and the Way thither* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1883), 24-26, 215.

[69] M. T. T. Hock, *Christian Mission and Malay Language Evangelical Literature (1819-1961) in Colonial Singapore: Origins, Impact and Malay-Muslim Responses* (PhD Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2019), 121-131, 149-50.

compromise on an issue related to Islam is perceived as a loss for the Malays and a gain for the non-Muslims, and vice versa.[70]

Conclusion

This study has succinctly established that the Malays were generally tolerant and receptive to other faiths and cultures. The episodes of interfaith encounters and exchanges between the Malays and the Europeans reflected their genuine openness, curiosity, and willingness to engage, understand and perhaps also learn from the others despite the general image of conservatism associated with them. However, the nature of these exchanges depended much upon the socio-political context of the particular period of their history, not necessarily in a progressive manner, but as a response to the shift in social reality they lived in. In this regard, the early modern era was significant in forming their general perception towards the European Christians, which was characterised by intense competition and enmity between them in which religious identity was highly intertwined with political and economic motives. Within such hostile a climate, religious discourses took place mostly under the political guise, and despite pockets of amiable encounters, most of the debates and coerced argumentations were utilised to demonstrate one's supremacy and superiority above the other.

During the colonial period, however, the non-interfering policies of the British towards the religion and customs of the Malays had in a way, reinforced their social and cultural identity, in which religions other than Islam were usually associated with the dominant racial marker of its adherents. Thus, despite their willingness to engage with the Europeans and Christian missionaries on matters

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[70] R. A. Hunt, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, 62: 83; P. C. Phan, *Christianities in Asia*, 82-8; K. S. Nathan, "Managing Ethnic and Religious Diversity," 48.

relating to theology, it was mainly out of curiosity or in response to certain polemical allegations made against their own faith. During this time too, politically motivated religious discourses greatly diminished, and social agents were at the forefront of these discourses especially in the liberal milieu of the Straits Settlements, whereas the traditional Malay ruler persisted as the main actor for all matters, religious or otherwise, in the more traditional setting of the Malay society.

Interestingly, the role of the *ulama* in these discourses, throughout these historical periods, also varied significantly from one context to another. The officially appointed *ulama* by the state was indubitably more constrained in their approach and influence in manoeuvring the interfaith discourse due to the intrinsic link between religion and politics as discussed. On the other hand, the politically independent *ulama* and religious leaders were found to be more responsive and dynamic towards these discourses, perhaps out of their sense of responsibility as social leaders for their community of believers. This might explain the dearth of interfaith-related literature in Malay produced by the *ulama* and the learned, especially within the court circle, and its socially detached monotonous content compared with the lively and engaging treatises produced by the social *ulama* in direct response to particular polemics.

The subjects of these interfaith debates seemed to linger around the divergence of standpoints between Islam and Christianity on some major theological issues such as the prophethood of Muhammad, the godship of Jesus, and the concept of trinity, as well as certain religious practices such as circumcision, polygamy, and others. A detailed analysis of these issues would undoubtedly prove to be significant yet considering the dearth of extant literature and the fact that most are only known through secondary

references, it is quite difficult to speculate further on its details.

It is also worthwhile to observe that regardless of the outcomes of these discourses, the Malays were usually persistent in their own belief as matters relating to conversion out of Islam is not simply a personal endeavour, but rather a major shift out of their cultural identity that implicates their sense of belonging within the larger Malay society. Thus, it was perhaps in protecting one's self-identity which was exacerbated by a certain degree of obliviousness on matters pertaining to religion that caused the laymen amongst them to withhold from any kinds of interfaith discourses or engagements with people of a different faith to safeguard from the bleak prospect of being labelled as renegade and traitor in the eyes of the people.

In this regard, it is pertinent to reiterate here that despite the various socio-political contexts and motives that prompted such endeavours, these interfaith exchanges and discourses amongst the Malays are significant enough as historical precedence of a plural religious past that can be further reflected in the contemporary setting. At this juncture in their history where religious revivalism and racial identity have deeply characterised their social and political landscape and defined their relations with others, it is possibly wise to pause, reflect on these historical instances, and ponder upon the lessons that can be learned in shaping a more tolerant, open, and harmonious plural society for the future.

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