

1 Socio-Religious Tolerance Exploring the Malaysian Experience

2 Dr. A.T. Talib¹

3 ¹ Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor,
4 Malaysia.

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6

7 **Abstract**

8 This article will discuss the history of religious tolerance, its definitions and experience of
9 Malaysian society. The brief discussion of the history of toleration starts from the Cyrus the
10 Great of Persia 500 years BCE until this century. Then it continues with the debate on the
11 definitions of tolerance. The discussion follows by exploring everyday life of the Malaysian
12 society in which it seems that there are contradictory situations happen in Malaysia. From
13 one pole, there are evidence of a highly tolerated society, whereby from the other pole, the
14 situation is totally opposite.

15

16 **Index terms**— Tolerance, religion, Malaysian society

17 **1 Introduction**

18 In recent times, the study of religion has become more and more important to every society, state and the world in
19 general. Every day we watch and hear about terrorism acts through media, which directly or indirectly are related
20 to religious beliefs. Researchers in the field of religious studies are working very hard to give answers regarding
21 this matter. They are including social scientists especially sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and
22 religious figures as well. One of the major elements that has been analyzed is toleration. Whether toleration is
23 relevant or irrelevant, or whether it exists or does not exist in our real world, this topic is still very much subject
24 to debate. It is also arguable whether this element is the cause -or the cure -to bring harmony to our world.

25 **2 II.**

26 **3 Tolerationfrom History to Concepts**

27 The initial attempt towards toleration that is worthy of appreciation even till today is the work of Cyrus the
28 Great of Persia (r.c. 558 -529 B.C.E). Cyrus the Great made Persia the centre of a mighty new empire with its
29 capital at Ecbatana (currently Hamadan) on the Silk Road ??Julian Holland: 1999). He is the key figure who
30 established the foundation for two traditions of toleration. He was praised in the Hebrew Bible for allowing the
31 Jews to return to Jerusalem after their captivity at Babylon . Hinduism has been identified as one of the most
32 tolerant of religions. This proclamation may be true as the Hindu way, being entirely racial and hereditary, does
33 not have the element of proselytization. Accordingly, it must tolerate alien faiths. The Mohammedan invasion
34 put an end to tolerance in India by introducing cruel persecution of the Hindus and destruction of their temples.
35 When the Mughal empire was established in Delhi, Akhbar, the most famous Mughal emperor, held discourses in
36 his palace every Friday where Brahmins, Buddhists and Parsis expounded their views as freely as Mohammedans
37 . Although Adeney provided historical evidence supporting his argument about Mohammedan rule which cannot
38 be denied, it seems to be focused on a few events only, while ignoring major contributions that Mohammedan
39 rule brought to India.

40 At the time of the Greeks, the toleration for great varieties of religious beliefs may be attributed to their
41 intellectual breadth, but also to the syncretism, which admitted a plurality of divinities into its pantheon.
42 Accordingly, as Adam remarks:

5 III.

43 "There was comparatively little persecution for religious beliefs in Greek antiquity. Religious institutions and
44 ceremonies were carefully guarded; but in respect of dogma the limits of toleration were very wide. We may infer
45 from a remark of the Platonic Socrates that Athenians in general cared little what a man believed, so long as he
46 did not attempt to proselytize. "

47 The Orphic believers, as the same authority points out, were tolerated since they showed no sign of abstaining
48 from the religious services which the city ordained. The Pythagoreans were attacked because they used their
49 religious organization for political ends. The daring teachings of Socrates had long been tolerated without any
50 interference on the part of the authorities . Xenophon placed himself in the Greek tradition with his policy of
51 religious toleration. His policy of toleration was toward Medes, Hyrcanians and other religious and ethnic groups
52 in his age .

53 During the Roman age, it was Roman state policy to allow conquered nations to continue with the practice of
54 their indigenous religious rites, including Jews and Christians. The Jews had the right to practice their religion
55 based on commercial reasons. At first Christians obtained tolerance to practice on account of their Jewish origin.
56 However when they separated, Christians were protected by Roman magistrates and police under The Acts of
57 the Apostles. Although Christians were protected, Christianity was not a religio licita (the legal status under
58 the Roman era, which means tolerated religion; this position enables adherents to enjoy some privileges such
59 as collecting taxes or exemption from military service). When Trajan ruled the Roman empire, there was a
60 limitation on the Roman policy of toleration whereby Christianity, which had previously been implicitly illegal,
61 become explicitly illegal .

62 Gallienus brought an end to religious persecution, when he issued a rescript in A.D. 260. This rescript was
63 ordered throughout the world encouraging all who had been in hiding due to religious persecution, to come out
64 of hiding and declared that no one may molest them. Gallienus's rescript has been claimed as the first Roman
65 edict of toleration. However, it does not indicate that Christianity was now made a religio licita. The Edict of
66 Milan was issued throughout the whole empire by Constantine in the year 313. The toleration granted in this
67 edict is absolute and unconditional. It expressly applied to the Christians, for whose benefit it was clearly and
68 primarily intended. But it also included devotees of all other religions as well. Constantine made Christianity
69 not only tolerated but legalized as the religion of the state .

70 In the very long history of the Roman period, Christianity was discriminated against by the Roman rulers.
71 They did not have the right to practice their faith and beliefs, until the Edict of Milan was issued, whereby
72 Christianity was legalized and made as the religion of the state.

73 4 ? In 1689, John Locke published the first Letter

74 Concerning Toleration (Locke 1983) anonymously in Holland in Latin which then was translated into English
75 immediately. It was followed by the Second and Third Letters . It seems that religious devotees in Greek and
76 Roman ages, and also in European countries before and after the Renaissance had been facing difficulties in
77 practicing their own beliefs. Although this matter has not been fully explored yet, religious persecution is likely
78 to occur in every society. The issue of asserting toleration in society began as early as during the time of the
79 ancient civilizations and it still a pertinent phenomenon until this moment.

80 5 III.

81 What is Toleration? a Brief Concept

82 Toleration and tolerance are two words that can be used interchangeably. The meanings of these two words
83 are similar and it is quite difficult to differentiate between them. These terms have been widely used in debates
84 of social, cultural and religious contexts, beside other scientific contexts such as in medicine. This paper will be
85 discussing further these terms in the context of religion.

86 According to in his toleration entry in the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, the word 'toleration' in its
87 legal, ecclesiastical and doctrinal application has a peculiarly limited significance. It connotes a refraining from
88 prohibition and persecution. Nevertheless, it suggests a latent disapproval, and it usually refers to a condition
89 in which the freedom, which it permits, is both limited and conditional. Toleration is not equivalent to religious
90 liberty, and it falls far short of religious equality. It assumes the existence of an authority which might have been
91 coercive, but which for reason of its own is not pushed to extremes. It implies a voluntary inaction, a politic
92 leniency.

93 John Christian , after a long discussion, concluded that "Toleration is a policy or attitude toward something
94 that is not approved and yet is not actively rejected. The word comes from the Latin tolerare (to bear or endure),
95 suggesting a root meaning of putting up with something. There is no single and widely accepted definition of
96 the term, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that every author uses it in her own way. Therefore it may be
97 best to understand the many uses of the words in terms of family resemblances."

98 "It should be clear that each of the languages that uses a variant of the Latin term (e.g. German. Toleranz;
99 Dutch, tolerantie; French, tolerance; Spanish, tolerancia; Italian, tolleranza; ect) adds its own slightly different
100 connotation to the word, based on historical experiences. Languages that do not derive the word from Latin have
101 synonyms, each with some overlap and some differences in usage."

102 Throughout much of the history of the concept, toleration referred largely to a policy or attitude towards
103 different religions. Intolerance could mean burning at the stake of heretics or apostates and forced conversions of
104 adherent to different religions, and tolerance could mean anything short of that. By the late twentieth century,
105 demand for toleration could also be viewed in reference to other disputed behaviour such as sexual orientations,
106 clothing and dress, drug use, vegetarianism versus meat eating, and more, although religion was often not far
107 behind these disputes. Ethnic and cultural behaviours and language usage could be the subject of tolerance and
108 intolerance as well.

109 One of the thought-provoking paradoxes of toleration that was posed by Laursen is that if one is In the
110 medieval age, there was comparatively rare occurrence of persecution until the advent of the Inquisitions in
111 the 13th century. Ecclesiastical, misguided zeal crushed out the spirit of tolerance and persecutions were still
112 happening when Europe entered the Renaissance period. Castellio (1515-1563), a Frenchman who has been a
113 friend of Calvin (1509-1564) insisted on absolute toleration. He argued that if the end of Christianity be the
114 diffusion of a spirit of beneficence, persecution must be its extreme antithesis. If persecution remains the essential
115 element of religion, that religion must be a curse to mankind tolerant of everything, then one is also tolerant of
116 the intolerant. This may mean complicity with persecution, or at least failure to prevent it.

117 Colin ??unton (1996) in his toleration entry in the Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society defined toleration
118 as the virtue of a preparedness to accept for the sake of higher good -especially the well-being of human society
119 -behaviour and convictions that are believed to be mistaken. It implies disapproval of what is tolerated, and
120 distinguished from the personal quality of tolerance by virtue of the fact that it refers to public policy whereby
121 religions, groups or opinions, which are believed to be contrary to official policy or doctrine, are allowed existence.
122 It is superficially paradoxical in theory, apparently involving acquiescence in error and immorality, but can be
123 argued to be necessary for higher reasons such as human freedom to dissent and the value to society of the
124 diversity of opinions. It tends also to be selectively applied in practice because it involves fine judgments about
125 what measure of diversity a society can tolerate without dissolution.

126 The Roman Empire was considered tolerant of religions. It can be seen from one point that it allowed pluralism
127 of religious practice, but in another aspect, it was repressive and persecuted religions which did not belong on
128 its list of officially approved religions. The discussions of toleration centred on religion in the Western society,
129 especially in the history of Christianity until very recent times.

130 From this writer's point of view, toleration can be seen from two angles. Firstly from the higher vantage point
131 of an authority that has the decision-making prerogative, power, policy and laws on their hands, and then down
132 to the masses. Whoever has the authority can determine what kind of toleration or which definition they are
133 going to use. In the context of democracy, the majority has the authority over the minority to select and practice
134 tolerance. The second point is from bottom to the top, which represents assertion from individual or minority
135 group facing the authority or majority. Therefore, toleration, which always correlates with religion right from
136 the beginning of human history until recently, is always the confrontation between the majority and minority
137 groups.

138 In the context of my research, considering a number of definitions that has been discussed before, I can conclude
139 that religious tolerance is an attitude of willingness to allow and accept religious differences to be practiced in
140 any community or country without prejudice even if it is in one's power to reject or deny it, in order to achieve
141 well being and a harmonious society. In this context, the allowance and acceptance of any religious differences
142 does not imply becoming a believer or follower of that particular religion. In other words, anybody is permitted
143 to believe and practice any religion. The power to reject or deny diverse religious beliefs and practices may take
144 any form such as, using legal authority, political power, religious institution, community pressure, individual
145 action and so on. Also religious tolerance does not mean one views other religions as equally true, but upholds
146 the right of others to practice their beliefs.

147 6 IV.

148 7 Theories Related to Tolerance

149 Cyrus the Great of Persia led the world to the practice of toleration with the foundation of two traditions of
150 toleration between the Persian Empire and the Jews. Xenophon of Greek had also used his policy of toleration
151 for political ends.

152 John Wycliffe (1330 -1384) developed the theory of toleration within his political theory of the king's
153 responsibility to protect the welfare of civilians. Christine de Pisan (1364 -1430) stressed the interdependence of
154 the various parts of the body to the scenario in politics in order to justify tolerant treatment of differences of
155 gender, class and nationality. Nicholas of Cusa recognized that mankind was inherently and inescapably diverse
156 in language, culture and politics. If there will always be different customs and rites, toleration is justified because
157 persecution is futile. Sebastian Castelio (1515 -1563) wrote some of the first sustained defences of toleration in
158 his *De haeretics* (1555; *Concerning heretics*).

159 Thomas Erastus (1524 -1583) gave his name to Erastianism, a term for state supremacy and policies that
160 enforce toleration in order to maintain political stability and prevent religious fighting.

161 Thomas Hobbes (1588 -1679) who wrote *Leviathan* (??651) is also credited with a theory of toleration in
162 the ruler's own self interest. Trying to control people's thought may provoke too much opposition and squanders

8 B) SCENARIO OF INTOLERANCE

163 power that can best be used elsewhere. ??erchant and ??eveller William Walwyn (1600 -1680) wrote in favor
164 of complete religious toleration on religious grounds. John ??ocke's (1632 ??ocke's (-1704) first work on
165 toleration opposed it, but he did a turnaround and developed a theory of toleration which he published in "A
166 Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689). Voltaire (1694 -1778) also wrote a significant work on toleration in his "A
167 Treatise on Toleration".

168 Most scholars studied religion from two main perspectives, namely structural functional point of view and
169 conflict perspective. Johnstone, Ronald L. (??001) gives an overview of religion in society from various
170 perspectives such as structural, functional and conflict. There are interesting relations between these theories
171 when we use them to understand religious tolerance. In my assumption, the level of conflict in society will reduce
172 when the level of tolerance increases and vice versa.

173 After taking into consideration all the above mentioned history, definitions and theories, the central point
174 is that the phenomenon of toleration can be seen from two different angles. Integral here is the differentiation
175 between the meaning and experience of 'toleration' practiced by those in authority and those who constitute the
176 masses. Thus, it will be those authority figures in power who determine what kind of 'toleration' will be exercised.
177 Therefore, toleration, which always correlates with religion, and started from the beginning of human history
178 and remains relevant until now, is the confrontation between majority and minority.

179 V. Experience of Tolerance in Malaysia Malaysia, a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multireligious country, is
180 where people from different parts of the world have made their home in the relatively recent past . Malaysian
181 leaders have constantly been defending the claim that the level of integration among ethnic groups is relatively
182 high. There are many government policies that have been formulated to increase and sustain ethnic integration
183 such as the New Economy Policy, National Unity Policy and National Education Policy. From all those policies
184 that have been established and implemented, it appears that ethnic based policies been developed to handle
185 ethnic integration. While the government seems overwhelmingly engrossed with the policies regarding national
186 integration, one thing that might be overlooked is that in line with those ethnic based policies, there is a religious
187 based policy. Although many Malaysian leaders claimed that the people are living in harmony, there are a
188 number of cases which happened recently that seem to be cracking that solidarity and need urgent attention
189 especially from the policy makers. National integration issues may not only be catered through ethnic-centered
190 points of view -religious matters also need to be considered. Religious toleration in a multireligious country is
191 increasingly important. This applies not only in Malaysia but also the rest of the world considering that there
192 are hardly any countries which have only a single religion. a) Scenario of Toleration A numbers of scenarios
193 have been explored and analyzed especially by scholars, which can help portray this phenomenon more clearly.
194 Since independence, a number of studies had been carried out on the topic of religious tolerance. According
195 to Wan ??zizah Wan Ismail (2001), in the long history of mankind, religion has been the most fundamental
196 source of happiness and the framework for the development of great civilizations. But throughout our history,
197 mankind has been grappling with the problem of differences, whether of religion, socio-economic status, ethnicity,
198 race, language, politics, ideology, gender and even body-weight and size. Unfortunately, religion sometimes has
199 been used, or rather abused to extenuate and justify the discriminatory policies and practices based on various
200 differences. Nevertheless in Malaysia, according to Wan Azizah, there is a high degree of religious tolerance,
201 and one evidence of this is the "Open house" concept that generally has been practiced among all major ethnic
202 communities during major festivals. Although there are a number who disagree with her statement by saying
203 that such concept is just happen at a surface level only.

204 A very interesting scenario has been explored by ??ohamad Yusof Ismail (2006) regarding the Buddhist
205 minority community who live in the Malay Muslim majority community in Kelantan. The Buddhist community
206 has twenty temples in Kelantan which is noted for its orthodoxy in particular with regards to national politics
207 and local practices of Islam. Based on that research, he concluded that both communities can live in harmony
208 without any unwanted incident being recorded for a very long period. It means that religious tolerance was
209 already practiced and proven in creating harmonious societies, particularly in Kelantan.

210 According ??o Zaid Ahmad (2003) it is interesting to track the experiences of ups and downs of interreligious
211 relations particularly in the post-independence era. The question is why all religions are capable of coexisting
212 without much disconcert. Indeed at this point, we would not be able to measure the level and perhaps to what
213 extent Malaysians practice tolerance in their daily lives.

214 8 b) Scenario of Intolerance

215 In ??ecember 7, 2006, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has admitted that race relations
216 in Malaysia are "fragile". This then shows how fragile the situation is among the races. If it is knocked it might
217 shake, but if it is knocked harder it might break, he said according to The Star's report of his speech. Although
218 this statement is about race relations, it is directly connected to inter-religious affairs. This speech was delivered
219 when Malaysia was facing a few issues which challenged the Malaysian constitution regarding religious freedom.

220 The case of Azlina Jailani or better known as Lina Joy which happened in 2006 drew attention not only in
221 Malaysia but also the rest of the world. She claimed that she had been converted from Islam to Christianity
222 since 1998, having as proof a Baptism Certificate. She had been denied from changing her name and removing
223 the word 'Islam' from her National Registration Identity Card by the National Registration Office of Malaysia.
224 The case was brought up at the Malaysia High Court and Federal Court.

225 This case has been used by Article 11 Group and Inter-Faith Commission Group (IFC), which claimed to
226 promote a more just practice of religion in Malaysia. The Malay Muslims feel that they have been threatened by
227 these two groups and their supporters and are fearful of losing the Islamic status and privileges in many aspects
228 of their daily life in this country. This scenario is developing a new dimension in Malaysian inter-ethnic and
229 inter-religious relations.

230 At the same time The Muslim Organisations in Defence of Islam (PEMBELA) was formed, which brought
231 together more than 50 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). PEMBELA brings Muslims aspirations of
232 defending the status of Islam in the Malaysian constitution from been attacked especially from Article 11 and
233 IFC groups.

234 In November 2006, a similar case as Lina Joy happened. One Indian Christian individual known as Rayyapan,
235 was converted to Islam in 1990 and got married with a Muslim lady. When he died in November 29, 2006, his
236 former wife, Mary, who was a Christian, demanded to bury her husband's body according to Christian funeral
237 practices but was challenged by Majlis Agama Islam Selangor or MAIS ??Selangor Islamic State Council). MAIS
238 claimed that Rayyapan was a Muslim according to their records and that he should be buried according to Islamic
239 funeral practices. This case also created social tension among ethnic groups in Malaysia.

240 **9 VI.**

241 **10 Conclusion**

242 All those scenarios, of both tolerance and intolerance, are reflective of the social situation in Malaysia nowadays.
243 It is very certain that the interreligious ethnic relations are very fragile and uncertain. Therefore, a study is
244 urgently needed in order to examine to what extent inter-religious ethnic relations in Malaysia need tolerance.
245 Such a study has been conducted and the answer for the above question will be shared in another occasion.

246 According to Anthony J. Marsella (2005) "Differences, of course, do not mean conflict, and conflict does
247 not mean violence is inevitable" . Chandra ??uzaffar (2001) said that there are many parallel values among
248 the different faiths. In other words, as reformminded women and men reach out to the core elements in their
249 respective religions, they will also invariably connect with common essential values and worldviews embodied in
250 the faith of the other. ^{1 2 3}

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