

THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC PROPAGATION SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL (IPSI) AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN MOSQUE PENANG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the role of Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI) in Interfaith Dialogue in Penang, Malaysia. Although the concept of interfaith dialogue is mentioned explicitly in the Holy Qur'an about 1400 years ago, it is still not commonly practiced today, partly because it needs the engagement from both sides, this regards for example the Muslim-Christian engagement. Due the wide spread of misconceptions and stereotypes against Islam in this era of globalization, Muslim scholars started to reactivate this divine effort. The contribution of late Ahmad Deedat who has inspired young Muslim to engage in this interfaith activity, as a result, the increasing number of Muslim personalities excel in this field such as Dr. Zakir Naik, Dr. Shabbir Ally, Hamza Tzortzis and Abdullah al-Andalusi to name a few. Surely, interfaith dialogue is one of the many effective ways to clear misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. This research is mainly based on observations and interviews at the Kapitan Keling mosque, Penang and IPSI headquarters in Penang. The research findings show that IPSI

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plays a very significant role in interfaith dialogue in Penang, and hence, the approach can be applied in any mosques in Malaysia which attracts many non-Muslim tourists such as Putra mosque and National mosque of Malaysia.

Keywords: IPSI, Interfaith Dialogue.

Abstrak

Kertas kerja ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti peranan Pertubuhan Penyebaran Islam Antarabangsa atau dikenali sebagai Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI) dalam dialog antara agama di Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. Walaupun konsep dialog antara agama telah disebut dengan jelas dalam al-Quran kira-kira 1400 tahun yang lalu, namun pelaksanaan dialog antara agama tersebut masih belum dapat diaplikasikan dan diamalkan dengan sepenuhnya kerana memerlukan penglibatan kedua-dua pihak, contohnya penglibatan dan kerjasama antara agama Islam dan Kristian. Oleh itu, disebabkan salah faham dan stereotaip terhadap agama Islam yang berlaku dengan meluas dalam era globalisasi ini, para sarjana Islam mula mengaktifkan semula usaha dialog antara agama ini. Sumbangan Allahyarham Ahmad Deedat dalam aktiviti dialog antara agama telah memberi inspirasi kepada para Muslim muda untuk melibatkan diri dalam bidang ini. Hasilnya, antara tokoh para sarjana Muslim yang meneruskan usaha dalam bidang ini seperti Dr Zakir Naik, Dr Shabbir Ally, Hamza Tzortzis dan Abdullah al-Andalusi adalah antara para sarjana yang bergiat secara aktif meneruskan amalan dialog antara agama. Sesungguhnya, dialog antara agama adalah salah satu cara yang berkesan untuk menjelaskan salah faham berkaitan agama Islam. Kajian ini dijalankan melalui kaedah temubual dan pemerhatian di ibu pejabat IPSI dan Masjid Kapitan Keling, berpusat di Pulau Pinang. Hasil penyelidikan menunjukkan bahawa IPSI memainkan peranan yang amat penting dalam dialog antara agama di Pulau Pinang dan pendekatan tersebut boleh diaplikasikan dalam mana-mana masjid di Malaysia yang dapat menarik ramai pelancong bukan Islam seperti di Masjid Negara dan Masjid Putrajaya.

Kata Kunci: IPSI, dialog antara agama.

INTRODUCTION

In general, inviting people to Islam is obligatory upon Muslims, but to invite non-Muslims to Islam is not an easy task. Partly because Muslims have to be careful in using any words which may be considered offensive to non-Muslims. This usually leads to negative image of the Muslims portrayed by the media. The level of awareness among Muslims to engage in interfaith dialogues between non-Muslims so far is still very low. Conveying the message of Islam to non-Muslims is certainly a good deed which will be rewarded on the Day of Judgment.

Allah says in the Qur'an: "And who is better in speech than one who calls men to Allah, work righteousness, and says, "Verily, I am of those who are the Muslims." (Surah Fussilat, 41:33)

In this era of new media, we hear very often news about people reverting to Islam, it is mostly not through the effort of Muslims but rather through different reasons, for example after reading the English translation of the Qur'an or the biography of Malcom X, and certainly we do not deny the effort of the late Ahmad Deedat and his student Dr. Zakir Naik in this field. We have to admit that the effort of Muslims in this field is still below the expectation. It is not because of the lack of financial support or knowledge about the teachings of Islam, but rather it is because of the lack of skill and experience or perhaps because of the attitude towards how and why to engage in interfaith dialogue.

According to Ibn Kathir, in Surah al-Nahl, verse 125: means "O Muhammad call mankind to the way of your Lord". Based on this verse, there is no difference between inviting Muslims or non-Muslims to the way of Allah. They both need to be invited and called so that they can obey the command of Allah SWT. It is a common sense in Islam that when the Prophet Muhammad SAW passed away, it is obligatory upon Muslims according to their capacity to continue his mission to all mankind.

Participating in interfaith dialogues need to have skills which can be learned through practices and trainings. So far, Muslims have a

good number of competent personalities in interfaith dialogues such as Dr. Zakir Naik, Dr. Syabbir Ally, Abdullah al-Andalusi, Sami Zaatari, Adnan Rashid, Hamza Tzortzis, Mehdi Hasan, Dr. Tareq Ramadan, Abdullah al-Faisal and Abdullah Kunde. They must have good understanding about the Qur'anic verse in Surah al-Nahl, verse 125: *"Debate with them in a very nice way"*. Thanks to the new media such as You Tube, because videos of interfaith dialogues or debates from these personalities can be watched in You Tube for free of charge.

Why interfaith dialogue? Interfaith dialogue is mentioned explicitly in the Qur'an especially with the people of the books; Jews and Christians. Allah says in the Qur'an:

"Say: "O people of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah. that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah." if then They turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah.s Will) (Surah al-Imran, 3: 62). "And dispute you not with the people of the Book, except with means better than mere disputation" (Surah al-Ankabut, 29: 46).

"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for your Lord knows best, those who have strayed from His Path, and He knows best those who receive guidance" (Surah al-Nahl, 16: 125).

These three Qur'anic verses explain clearly why Muslims are obliged to communicate with the people of the Books to convey the message of Islam, either through discussions, public lectures, debates or dialogues. These three Qur'anic verses give straightforward messages to Muslims as how and what to convey to non-Muslims. The use of English language in interfaith dialogue attracts the attention of many people especially to non-Muslim because English

has become a universal language. The choice of language depends on the participants or the context of a particular dialogue. Preferably by using English, the attraction of the audience will increase, the people of the Books also can communicate with Muslims effectively.

Until today Muslim communities does not have a University which trains student how to engage in interfaith dialogue, maybe because interfaith dialogue does not generate income or they are lacking expertise to train students. In other words, many Islamic Universities mostly teach methodology how to convey the message in general but less emphasis is given to the practical aspect of interfaith dialogue especially to non-Muslims. But when we look at the Qur'an it is explicitly mentioned about interfaith dialogue as part and parcel of Islamic teaching.

Reversion is not the only objective of interfaith dialogue. Giving the right understanding about Islam and Muslims and the ability to correct misconceptions about Islam are also very important objectives of interfaith dialogues. Thus, interfaith dialogues can succeed without any reversions taking place. Such controversial impressions by the Muslims regarding media portrayals of the Islamic world could be reduced if more initiative was taken in enhancing interfaith dialogues to clear these misconceptions.

DEFINITION OF DEBATE AND DIALOGUE

“Debate is a formal discussion, for example at a public meeting or in Parliament; a contest between two speakers or two groups of speakers, to show skills and abilities in arguing (Hornby, 1974: 222). In addition, Hornby (1974: 238) further describes in “Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English” the word dialogue can be used in two meanings first dialogue is a conversation or talk and second dialogue is to exchange of views. Both of these two meanings can be applied in the context of interfaith dialogue.

From the definitions above, we can conclude that a debate produces a result which is accepted by both parties, while a dialogue may not produce a result which is accepted by both parties. But it is also possible to have debates without any final decisions made which is

accepted by both parties, for example debate by Josh Mc Dowell & John Gilchrist with Ahmad Deedat in *The Islam Debate*, where both parties maintained their ideas and perspectives differently. (Josh Mc Dowell, 1983). Interestingly, the Qur'an uses the term '*interfaith debate*' (see in Surah al-Nahl verse 125) instead of '*interfaith dialogue*'. Whatever terms being used, whether debate or dialogue, the important thing is a constructive communication takes place between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The History of Interfaith Dialogue

The first interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians took place in Habsyah led by Ja'far bin Abi Talib, when the Muslims went there seeking for protection from the oppression they faced in Makka, the priest of Habsyah asked them their opinion about Mary the mother of Jesus, and eventually the priest converted to Islam as described by Ibn Hisham (n.d: 357-361). In the history of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, Ibn Hisham explained the second time was when a Christian group from Najran went to Madinah to have a dialogue with the Prophet Muhammad SAW for a few days and the Prophet allowed them to pray in the mosque.

After these two interfaith dialogues we do not know much about the development of interfaith dialogues, except a few encounters between Muslims and Christians (Alatas, 2014: 18), until the news about the experiences of the late Ahmad Deedat came out. The impact of Ahmad Deedat in interfaith dialogues is so profound that today we can easily name ten competent Muslims in the field of interfaith dialogue or debate.

To sum up, if Allah mentions interfaith dialogue or debate in the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad SAW did practice it, who are we to say otherwise thinking that to engage in interfaith debates is like degrading the Islamic theology to the same level with other religions? For instance, both Jordan and Qatar governments have approved the establishment of well-organized interfaith dialogue institutions. For example, institute of the Royal Islamic Studies Centre, Jordan in interfaith dialogue, and Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) in Qatar. Both of these interfaith dialogue institutions promote mutual understanding, respect and

cooperation to the world that Islam has professional approach to communicate with the West and non-Muslims.

Obstacles of Interfaith Dialogue

Regarding obstacles of interfaith dialogue, it is a well-known fact that the relationship between Muslims and Christians has been interrupted by certain events which gave deep negative impact on the Muslims attitude to the West. For example, the crusades, the invasion of the Muslim lands and the exploitation of its natural resources. On the other hand, the Christian world would also feel humiliated by the Muslim army by conquering Turkey and turning it into Islamic country, and the liberation of Palestine from the Crusades by Salahuddin al-Ayubi.

Due to these events and other factors, many Muslim scholars feel hesitant to engage in any interfaith dialogues with the Christians. If the feeling of fears among different nations and religions in sociopolitical issue exists, it is also very natural to occur among them such religious and cultural issues. 9/11 incident plays a significant role in motivating both parties to engage in interfaith debate or dialogue. Muslims will not easily accept the accusation that Islam promotes violence and terrorism. On the other hand, Christians will not accept the accusation that Christianity has been corrupted or Jesus has not been crucified.

ISLAMIC PROPAGATION SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL (IPSI) PENANG, MALAYSIA.

IPSI was established in 1st December 2004. It is a non-government, non-political organization, popularly known as IPSI (Penang). The primary concern of IPSI is to disseminate the word of Allah via the sincere promotion of the reading, understanding and practicing of the Holy Qur'an and As-Sunnah. IPSI devotes its activities in reminding mankind of his fitrah; the worship of the one and only God. IPSI struggles to deliver the message of Islam to people in their journey of life through its mosque tour, public lectures, seminars, forums, interfaith dialogues, street da'wah, table da'wah, exhibitions, and distributing various printed and electronic mediums. For the past three years IPS has enlightened more than 300 new Muslim converts

through this noble work of the prophet SAW (Kamarudin Abdullah, 2014).

Stated in the organization chart, Tuan Haji Kamarudin Abdullah as a President/founder of IPSI. Dr. Mohamed Amir Shah Abd Aziz is as a Vice President and trustee. And, Prof. Madya Dr. Abdul Halim Abdul Aziz is also as a trustee in this organization. While, there were three advisor of IPSI: (1) Dr. Danial Zainal Abidin, (2) Prof. Madya Dato' Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin and (3) Sheikh Mohd Hussain Yee Abdullah. In addition, Miss Nursyazwani Bukhori as the secretary; therefore, Mr. Mohamed Sirajudin Mohamed Kamal is a treasurer/trustee. Another committee are Mr. Mohamed Ghaus Abdullah, Mr. Mohamed Thaha Abdul Azeez, Mr. Mohd Hanafi Jusoh, Mrs, Khatijah Lim Abdullah, Mrs, Nursakinah Suardi, Miss Nik Siti Fairuz Mohamed and Mrs. Norraihan Abdul Rahman. IPSI has 50 members altogether.

The initial da'wah promotion began primarily centered around Kapitan Keling Mosque, mainly in guiding non-Muslim tourists around this historical mosque which is the second oldest in Penang. The ground floor of the minaret of this mosque is still being used as an Islamic information center, courtesy of the committee members of the mosque (Kamarudin Abdullah, 2014).

Physically, IPSI has shown a tremendous achievement in conveying the message of Islam to non-Muslims in Malaysia, where masjid Kapitan Keling, Penang becomes its basis for attracting non-Muslim tourists to come. Every day the mosque has average 50-80 non-Muslim visitors. Every single non-Muslim visitor is entertained by a Muslim volunteer to explain about the history of the mosque which was built about 200 years ago as well as the teachings of Islam, and finally presented to them a copy of English translation of the Holy Qur'an and pamphlets about Islam and Christianity from an Islamic perspective.

The Role of IPSI in Implementing Interfaith Dialogue among Non-Muslims in Malaysia

IPSI as mentioned before is a non-government organization established to disseminate the word of Allah via the reading,

understanding and most importantly to them through practicing of the al-Qur'an and Sunnah. It can be said that IPSI also is one of the centers in Malaysia that build bridge between new Muslims with their other brothers of born Muslims. Besides that, the role of IPSI is to share and deliver the message of Islam especially to the non-Muslims. By sharing and delivering about the beauty of Islam, it can attract to non-Muslim in knowing about Islam and at the same time the da'wah of Islam occurs during these interfaith dialogues.

One of the examples of interfaith dialogue program in IPSI is the public talk program entitled "Basic belief: The Concept of God" that was hosted by Kamarudin Abdullah (President of IPSI). In this situation, the Holy Qur'an (2:21) states that, "*O People, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, in order that you may attain mindfulness (taqwa).*" Kamarudin Abdullah explained the concept of God and it has enlightened the participants, listeners and audience (non-Muslims) to the truth teaching of Islam. In this aspects, individuals are free to choose either to accept or deny the Creator as mentioned in the Qur'an (18:29), "*the truth is from your Lord and let him who will believe and let him who will reject*".

All of the information during the dialogue program is based on the Qur'an and hadith. He did not only gave the lectures but also showed interesting videos to his participants. From the author's point of view, his talk is very energetic, enthusiastic, touching and other attractive characteristics. From this effort, they have spread the message of Islam that there is only one God. Thus, in the authors view, it is in line with the point of opinion from Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman in the work of Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Suzy Aziziyana Saili and Muhd Anuar Awang Idris (2012: 116) the concept and understanding of interfaith dialogue are practical and adaptable to the context of multiple communities in Malaysia and can also deemed conclusive to the actual understanding of interfaith dialogue that should have taken place.

In addition, dialogue not only discusses question of theology and doctrine, but should also serve as an arena for one to get better acquainted with the religion, as well as serving an arena for seeking of knowledge proposed by Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman (in

Khairulnizam Mat Karim et al., 2012: 116). Hence, the other purpose is to develop close relationships and strengthen the feelings and sentiments of respect to others. Thus, bearing this in mind, Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman (in Khairulnizam Mat Karim et al., 2012) very much suggested if the activity of interfaith dialogue is formed on two platforms, namely first “Dialogue on Religions” and second “Dialogue on Inter-Religious Co-operation.

In conclusion, IPSI plays a significant role in practicing and adapting both of these interfaith activities. For instance, IPSI organized these interfaith dialogue programs among new Muslims (e.g; dialogue on religion) and the President of IPSI at the same time as a former student Sheikh Ahmed Deedat participated and being invited in interfaith dialogue program namely “Dialog Harmoni” programs in TV Al-Hijrah (e.g; dialogue on inter-religious cooperation). Thus, at least, they have an effort to spread the message of Islam especially to non-Muslims. This shows IPSI plays active role in interfaith dialogue among other religions in order to share and explain the beauty of Islam.

Major Activities of IPSI in Interfaith Dialogue

(a) Mosque tour

Public tours of Kapitan Keling mosque, the heritage mosque at the heart of Georgetown city, Penang, has been the main highlight of IPSI’s activities since its inception. Many school children, tertiary education students, group tours and approximately 100 tourists visiting Penang are taken on a tour of the grand mosque on monthly basis. A souvenir pack comprising of books and other literatures are distributed free.

(b) Reversion

IPSI also conducts reversion ceremonies to welcome new members to the Muslims. These reverts are provided with free lessons, training and motivational programs in the Islamic way of life.

(c) International outreach

The main medium of IPSI is through public lecture. It is a cherished tradition of IPSI to involve people of all beliefs and persuades them

through its public program. IPSI is active in inviting leaders of the former Christian faith for discussions on Islam and Christianity and it is a pleasure to note that many Christians and other believers attend IPSI programs.

(d) Domestic outreach

IPSI is also active in inviting local speakers to give public talks and lectures especially to the Muslim community. All of them have their own expertise in various branches of knowledge like science, religion, medicine, international affairs and so forth.

(e) Hadith discourse

Hadith discourse is conducted by Sheikh Husain Yee bin Abdullah on a monthly basis. They are open to the public and attended by Muslims and non-Muslims alike and are absolutely free of charge. The focus of the discourse is to study the life and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW.

(f) Comparative Religion Courses

IPSI also offers a course in comparative religion and is being conducted in three phases by qualified trainers namely by Brother Kamaruddin Abdullah and Brother Mohamed Sirajuddin bin Mohamed Kamal. This course is conducted in collaboration with the Islamic center of University of Science Malaysia.

(g) Revert Classes and Reverts Visit/Welfare

IPSI also offers classes for reverts conducted by brother Lokman bin Madinah. IPSI also visit them periodically. This activity is conducted by Brother Gaus bin Abdullah.

(h) Da'wah Training Seminar

IPSI conducted Da'wah training monthly. Speakers were invited to present papers on: (1). Why Da'wah? (2). Identify the basic foundation of another religion. (3). Questions posed by non-Muslims and how to answer them. (4). Guiding the way for the new reverts in Islam. (5). Realizing the value and importance of awareness.

(i) Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue organized by IPSI invited four major religions in Malaysia (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity) to discuss

on the fundamentals and commonalities of the different faiths. The audience, as usual, comprise of different races and religions.

(j) The Qur'an

The Qur'an is the words of God which He revealed to His prophet Muhammad (peace be up on him) through the Archangel (peace be up on him).

(k) Maulid al-Rasul celebration

On the 12th Rabiul awal each year, IPSI organizes a number of activities to celebrate Maulid al-Rasul. IPSI volunteers give away books on the prophet Muhammad (peace be up on him) roses, and chocolates to the non-Muslims. Target areas/vicinitys include the University Science of Malaysia campus, Kapitan Keling Mosque, National Mosque of Kuala Lumpur and also throughout Malaysia.

(l) Penang Heritage Day

The Kapitan Keling mosque is one of the Heritage sites where during the celebration it is frequented by local and foreign visitors by the hundreds. IPSI plays an important role by conducting free guided tours of the mosque and its information center. Free souvenir packets are also given away to visitors.

(m) Printing & Publication

IPSI prints and distributes various types of Islamic wisdom literatures by different authors to be given away hoping for return to non-Muslim and Muslims for a small sum of donation towards cost of postage, packaging, printing and publications.

In addition, IPSI also conducted IPSI Medicare (Free Medical Clinic), Al-Qur'an Classes (Men/women/Children), Arabic Classes (Basic), Discourse on Ulum Qur'an (The sciences of the Qur'an), Hospital Visit, Destitute & Old Folks Welfare. All of this information is stated in the IPSI pamphlet. (Kamarudin Abdullah, 2014). From these various activities in reaching out to non-Muslims, we can see clearly that these approaches can be applied in any mosques in Malaysia especially the one which has many non-Muslim visitors.

Contemporary Implementation and Application of Interfaith Dialogue History by IPSI in Kapitan Keling Mosque Penang, Malaysia.

In Islam, al-Qur'an uses two different words in highlighting the issues of dialogue. Firstly, the word is from "*hiwar*", and secondly is the word "*jidal*". According to Ibn Kathir, in Surah al-Nahl, verse 125, commands the Prophet Muhammad SAW to argue with the people of the books in the best manner so that it can be more effective. In addition, Khairulnizam Mat Karim et al. (2012: 113) in their work cited that it is clearly stated that the word used in labeling the word 'dialogue' is the word "*jidal*" in the Qur'an, in the following verse:

Meaning: *invite (all) to the way of Thy Lord with wisdom and preaching; and argue with them In ways that are best and Most gracious: for Thy knoweth best, who have strayed from His path, and who receive guidance. (Surah al-Nahl, 3: 64)*

Another verse in the Qur'anic passage invites Muslims to conduct dialogue in the form of giving arguments with the people of books in the excellent way is also mentioned in the *Surah al- 'Ankabut*, verse 46:

Meaning: *and dispute ye not with the people of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, "We believe In the Revelation which has come down to us and In that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)."*

According to Ibn Kathir the word "*jidal*" referred in this verse carries a positive interpretation. It is also referred as the main principle in teaching approaches (da'wah), where the word "*jidal*" is accompanied by the saying "*billati hiya ahsan*" (in a good manner) (Ibn Kathir, 2000: 367-368). Furthermore, one of another example on dialogue in the Qur'an can be referred to this verse:

Meaning: *Allah has indeed heard (and accepted) the statement of the woman who pleads with Thee concerning Her husband and carries Her complaint (in prayer) to Allah. and Allah (always) hears the arguments between both sides among you: for Allah hears and sees (All things). (Surah Al-Mujaadilah, 58: 1).*

Meanwhile, According to Abdulaziz Osman Altwaiji (1997), Khairulnizam Mat Karim et al. (2012: 114), Sohirin Mohammad Solihin et al. (2013: 98), in Surah al-Kahfi the word 'dialogue' is repeated twice in the verse 34 and 37. Allah says in the Qur'an:

Meaning: *(Abundant) was the produce This man had: He said His companion, In the course of a mutual argument: "more wealth have I than and more honour and power In (my following of) men." (Surah al-Kahfi, 18: 34).*

Then, a person who commits to the truth and justice responded to him,

Meaning: *His companion said to him, in the course of the with him: "Dost Thou deny Him who created Thee out of dust, then out of sperm-drop, then fashioned Thee into a man? (Surah al-Kahfi, 18: 37).*

Thus, the best way and method to implement interfaith dialogue is by having a dialogue and argue with them in the best manner with other religious adherents in Malaysia. It can be seen IPSI also practicing and implementing this concept to the non-Muslims which gave a significant impact to their visitors. For example, some of the visitors in Kapitan Keling mosque from the beginning they do not know in depth about the beauty of Islam, but after having a conversation and dialogue with the committee of IPSI, some of the visitors understand the principles and teaching of Islam. Thus, the words '*hiwar*' and '*jidal*' must be used in appropriate ways and suitable with the circumstances and environment of the multiple communities.

Now, in Malaysia we are living in multiple religions, ethnic and culture, thus the right method we can practice is through ‘*hiwar*’ that means dialogue with other religious adherents. Therefore, it is concluded that IPSI plays a very significant role in interfaith dialogue or “*hiwar*” between the non-Muslims in Malaysia. This point of view is supported by Mitwally Ibrahim (2010: 125) “the basic principles in interfaith meeting is that they are scholarly endeavors for building bridges of understanding to facilitate the propagation of truth or at least ensuring a peaceful coexistence of peoples belonging to various faiths”.

According to Mitwally Ibrahim (2010), it is permissible to hold interfaith meetings at mosques and other places of worship as long as the sanctity of the mosque is respected and worshippers are not disturbed. This notion is based on the preferred view of Muslims scholars. When the time of Prayer is due, the Muslims are permitted to allow non-Muslims to pray in their mosques as long as that does not become a regular practice. Any non-Muslims who would like to join the Muslims in their Prayer should not be prevented from doing so; it seems that this would have the advantage of attracting their hearts.

Based on the statement above, IPSI follows the prophetic tradition which means during the time of Prophet Muhammad SAW, he gives the permission to the Christians of Najran to perform their worship in their ways and allows them to enter the mosque. This contemporary implementation of interfaith dialogue applied by IPSI in Kapitan Keling mosque Penang is based on historical fact. Therefore, this way at least enables to attract non-Muslims and other visitors to know about Islam. Besides that, it can touch their hearts to love and appreciate the beauty of Islam.

IPSI has been successful as to what has been done during the history of our Prophet Muhammad SAW. It was explained in the history of Interfaith Dialogue and its Contemporary implementation was held by IPSI towards interfaith dialogue in Kapitan Keling mosque Penang, Malaysia.

Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an:

Meaning: say: *“O people of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah. that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah.”* if then they turn back, say ye: *“Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's Will). (Surah Ali-Imran, 3: 64).*

In this verse, the point to note is that the delegation of Najran came to the Prophet Muhammad SAW, according to a tradition, with two aims in view: to share their faith in hope of winning Prophet Muhammad SAW to Christianity and to establish a peace covenant with the Muslim state that would insure for them religious freedom and social independence. The delegates who included religious and political leaders of Najran were allowed to offer their prayers in the Prophet's mosque in spite of the protestations from some of the Companions of the Prophet SAW (Abu 'I-Fida Isma'il b'Umar Ibn Kathir al-Qurshi, 1419 AH).

Here Ibn Kathir quoted Muhammad Ibn Ishaq on the occasion of revelation of verse 61 of Surah Ali-Imran, who maintained that Christians of Najran argued with the Prophet Muhammad SAW about Jesus by claiming his divinity. In the south of Arabia, there is a place called Najran. There lived the Christian tribe of Najran who staunchly believed that Jesus (Prophet Isa) was the son of God. The Prophet Muhammad SAW invited them to accept Islam. In response to that, a delegation of their priests and elders came to Madina. They wanted to discuss religion with the Prophet Muhammad SAW.

Their argument was that Jesus was born without a father, so he was the son of God. The Holy Prophet explained to them that just as Allah created Prophet Adam without a father or even a mother, in the same way He created Jesus without a father. Hence Jesus was a servant of Allah as was Prophet Adam. The Christians did not agree with this simple truth. They stuck to their belief that Jesus was the son of God. The Prophet asked them to wait. Then came the following Revelation (message from Allah):

Meaning: “O Messenger! If they dispute with you in this matter after the knowledge has come to you, then, say, ‘Come, let us call our sons and your sons, and our women and your women, and our souls and your souls. Then let us earnestly invoke and lay the malison (curse) of Allah on those who lie” (Surah Ali-Imran, 3: 61).

This is the reason that the Prophet Muhammad SAW called them for *mubahalalah*. The commentaries on the verse 61, inviting the delegation to *mubahalalah*. It was then agreed that the Christians seek *mubahalalah* with the Prophet. The meaning of *mubahala* is that both of them invoke from Allah that he, who speaks the truth, may survive and he, who is untrue may perish.

From all above, it can be said that the dialogue or conversation happened and occurred between the Prophet Muhammad SAW and the delegation of Najran. It shows that the interaction between a noble person Prophet Muhammad SAW and the people from different religious tradition, faith, spiritual and other belief. Besides that, in Islam there is a line between interfaith dialogue and the concept of Da’wah. According to Ismail Al-Faruqi (n.d), the meaning of da’wah is the effort by the Muslim to enable other men to share and benefit from the supreme vision, the religious truth and can be defined as “an invitation to think, to debate and argue”.

Apart from that, interfaith dialogue as defined above can be categorized as one of the mechanism of Da’wah. Thus, Ghulam Haider Aasi (1999: 74) in his study of *Muslim Understanding of Other Religion: A study Of Ibn Hazm’s Kitab al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa’ wa al-Nihal*, cited that the methodology used by Ibn Hazm in his understanding of other religion is called as a “dialectical-ideological method”. Both “dialectic” and “dialogue” are meant here in their generic as well as in their literal senses. Ibn Hazm analyzed religious data according to the rules of logic and dialectics, and the most importantly is he engaged himself in dialogue with the leading scholars of other religious tradition in his time. To him, the true historian of religion is the seeker of the truth. To study the religious history of mankind is to comprehend man’s perception, appropriation

and living of the truth which makes all other aspects of one's life a meaningful coherent whole (Ghulam Haider Aasi, 1999: 75).

Thus, through this understanding, the main point that the author wants to highlight is seeking the truth in our whole life. In this aspect, it is shows that dialogue with others religious adherents are really important especially in the context of Malaysia. It is because, we are living in various religions, races and ethnic that can foster and unite the society by implementing interfaith dialogue. The most important things for today is to practice and implement interfaith dialogue among different faith of religions which there living in diverse society and community in this country.

Based on the above explanations, IPSI takes a serious action and plays a role in practicing and delivering the message of Islam. The main places for IPSI to spread and disseminate the message of Islam through the Kapitan Keling Mosque. This mosque was 200 years old mosque and rich with history but it's the magnificent architecture that first captivate the eyes of visitors described in the Star Online 1 June 2008. Therefore, this mosque can be said as one of the attractive places in Penang. Most of the tourists will come to this mosque due to its unique design.

A. Ghafar Ahmad (1999) in his study "The Architectural Styles of Mosques in Malaysia: From Vernacular to Modern Structures" mentioned that Kapitan Keling Mosque, Georgetown, Penang (1916) including one of the examples of the colonial mosques with the Moorish influences (including classical features). He stated that there are a number of mosques built during the British occupation of Malaysia between 1795 and 1957. Some of the mosques were designed by local architects and designers whilst others were designed and supervised by British architects and engineers from the Public Works Department.

Besides that, most of the mosques built during the colonial period are architecturally different from the vernacular mosques in terms of scale and proportion, form, features and building materials. Domes (either onion-shaped or top-shaped), turrets, classical columns, pilasters, pointed arches, keystones, pediments and plastered

renderings on cornices and capitals are common features found in the colonial mosques. Effectively, the British architects, at the turn of the century, had combined the Moorish influence and the classical styles to portray an Islamic image to the mosques (A. Ghafar Ahmad, 1999). That why, until now Kapitan Keling Mosque can be classified as a “Mosque Tourism” and one of the places for the tourists especially to non-Muslims.

Furthermore, the Star Online 1 June 2008 entitled “Simply Unique” stated that the Kapitan Keling Mosque in Penang is simply majestic. During a visit to the mosque, it is easy to get distracted by the unique blend of the British and Moorish architecture that adorned this building. But hidden beyond these walls are deep rooted traditions and beliefs that have been passed for over 200 years. From a glance away the Kapitan Keling Mosque might be no more than just a historical structure but a deeper look will reveal the beauty of a culture that has been preserved for over 200 years. This is what makes the mosque so renowned, and most of all, unique.

At this point, IPSI plays a key role in having such a dialogue with a visitor. During a dialogue or conversation, indirectly the interfaith dialogue occurs between the representative from IPSI and non-Muslims (tourists). For instance, the person participated in this works is Kamarudin Abdullah, Mohamed Sirajudin Mohamed Kamal, Mohamed Ghaus Abdullah and other volunteering Muslims). Most of them are well trained in interfaith dialogue. This is because they learned the subject of comparative religion. According to Kamarudin Abdullah (2014) during a dialogue with a visitor in Kapitan Keling mosque, some of the visitors are Christian priests but they are not showed it. However, through their character, it can be seen clearly that the Christian priest wants to initiate and provoke many questions about Islam. It also happened during the time of Prophet Muhammad SAW the interfaith dialogue questions occur between Muslim and other different faiths.

Moreover, the efforts of IPSI in interfaith dialogue can be seen more than 300 non-Muslims was converted to Islam. It is a high achievement by IPSI and they deliver the message of Islam to people not only at the Kapitan Keling Mosque (mosque tour) but also from all walks of life

through its public lectures, seminars, forums, interfaith dialogues, street da'wah, table da'wah, exhibitions and various assortments of printed and electronic mediums (Kamaruddin Abdullah, 2014). According to Ataullah Siddiqui (1998: 242) the dialogue must follow these ground rules: (1) no religious pronouncement is beyond the reach of criticism, (2) internal coherence must exist, (3) proper historical perspective must be maintained, (4) correspondence with reality must exist, (5) freedom from absolutized scriptural figurizing, and (6) dialogue should be carried on in areas where there is a greater possibility of success, example in the field of ethical duties. From the author's points of view, based on the above guideline in dialogue, IPSI used this approach in practicing and disseminating the message of Islam towards their visitors in Kapitan Keling mosque.

In addition to that, well organized different methods, approaches and strategies are also used by IPSI during a dialogue with the visitors in Kapitan Keling Mosque. For instance, how to tackle the non-Muslim visitors to make them understand Islam in a very short period of time. The visitors just visited for a while, thus the most important strategy here is to use the right technique in disseminating the message of Islam and at the same time respect and appreciate their religions. Some of the techniques implemented by the committee of IPSI towards their visitors is welcoming them in with good manners, explain to them the uniqueness of the Mosque, the architecture of the mosque, the beauty of the mosque, explaining in briefly why we Muslims prayer five times a day, the way the Muslims take ablution (*wudu'*), the meaning of the Surah *al-Fatihah* and so on.

All the techniques above were implemented by committee members of IPSI towards visitors in short time. It shows that they learned and deliver it expertly. Some of the visitors are much admired and were listened carefully. Hence, by having this opportunity, at least the committee of IPSI has the potential to spread the message of Islam and which was indirectly shown, thus interfaith dialogues between them were initiated. The main focus of IPSI is to non-Muslims. IPSI strive to continue this noble work of the Prophet SAW in da'wah to non-Muslims and having such a dialogue with other religious adherents.

Thus, based on the observation and interviews, the authors suggest that the sacred places (mosque) can be as a center for da'wah and interfaith dialogue between Islam and other religions in Malaysia. It was implemented at the Kapitan Keling mosque by IPSI in Penang. Therefore, the implementation was successful because that is the great achievement (More than 300 non-Muslims was converted to Islam) in IPSI. They were permitted to spread the da'wah sincerely through their heart because solely of Allah SWT. It is difficult to find out other non-governmental organizations (most of them are non-Malay Muslims) struggle to continue the efforts of da'wah. Thus, from the author's opinion, who will continue this journey? Let us think together. We should be proud because we have at least one of non-governmental organization namely IPSI, that takes action in this noble works and it would be as role model to other organizations to follow their methods.

NON MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE ABOUT INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN MALAYSIA

According to Jagir Singh, the President of Consultative Counsel of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism (MCCBCHST), in Sunday Star, 16.2.2014 "Time to root for more tolerance",

"The basic requirement is that each of us must respect the diversity of the religions and cultures in the country. We should also accept that all religions are revelations of God-that they come from God and came into existence only by the will of God. If you accept that we all of the one creator, you accept that cultures are also the will of God. So, the diversity and plurality that we see in the country is also the will of God. If God wanted, He could have created one single culture and race but in His wisdom He created many cultures and races. In the universe there are many species of animals and plants. So, when we look at the creation, we can see that it is a blessing". Jagir Singh even stresses that fair compromise would be that the word Allah could be used by anybody, during a prayer within a house of worship. But its use cannot be abused, such as for

proselytization, or be used in derogatory manner.” (Jagir Singh, 2014: 21).

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

“Dialogue in Malaysia has far from lived up to its potential to solve or minimize inter-religious or inter-ethnic conflicts and disagreements. During the last few years, several events took place that threaten to disrupt the racial and religious harmony that this country has enjoyed for so long. The ongoing controversy over the word “Allah”, the recent explosion of a Molotov cocktail at a Penang church in January. The pig head incident of 2012, and the cow’s head protest in August 2009, are just few examples that suggest there is a danger that race and inter-religious relations may deteriorate in the near future, particularly if certain political groups, NGOs and the media act in an irresponsible manner and incite hatred between communities. As Islam is the religion of state in the country, it is the Islamic religious authorities should take the lead in inter-religious dialogue. The goal of such dialogue is to create an atmosphere of trust among the leaders of different religious communities have with each other, and to possibly solve these problems before they become ammunition for politicians, bigots and hate mongers in their quest for political one-upmanship” (Farid Alatas, 2014: 18). He further disapproves the idea of some Muslims that if Muslims enter into inter religious dialogue, it is recognition of the theological equality of Islam with other religions. Since Islam is the one true religion, the argument goes, it cannot put itself at the

level of the other religions by conceding dialogue⁷. This erroneous view arises from a lack of knowledge of inter-religious dialogue as part of Islamic heritage, he argues.

There is another type of Muslims who disagree with interfaith dialogue, not because of theological reason but because according to them lack of morality in conducting interfaith dialogue (Syalaby, n.d: 72). In other words, they cannot see the concept of win-win situation could be achieved through this kind of dialogue. We do not know precisely the number of Muslims who disagree with interfaith dialogue, but based on the ground we can safely say that there is a good number of Muslims who actually engage in interfaith dialogues⁸ or debates⁹.

Although there is a disagreement on the importance and benefits of interfaith dialogue, IPSI has proven that interfaith dialogue can be implemented in this country. The special aspect of approaches by IPSI is that they are conducted in a very friendly way which can touch the heart of the visitors. This research showed that IPSI played a very significant role in interfaith dialogue in Penang, and the approach can be applied in any mosque in Malaysia which attracted many non- Muslim tourists such as National mosque and Putra mosque. Many mosques in Malaysia especially the Putra mosque and National mosque which have many non-Muslims tourists can do the same but perhaps they are lacking in creativity and Muslim personalities who are willing to volunteer to explain Islam to the non-Muslim tourists, which is a waste of opportunity from an Islamic perspective.

Any mosque which can attract 30-50 non-Muslim visitors daily should recruit full time staff who can speak English to explain to them about the teachings of Islam. We cannot guide them but we can only convey the message of Islam to these non-Muslims. Only Allah

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

8 www.acommonword.com

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

can guide mankind to His religion. This is a great opportunity for Muslims to gain reward from Allah since the reward will be given regardless of the result of the interfaith dialogue. In any case Muslim will earn the pleasure of Allah as long as he does it sincerely for the sake Allah.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, Muslims must be active in conveying and explaining the teachings of Islam to both Muslim and non-Muslims, because of the misconceptions about the teachings of Islam exists not only among non-Muslims but also among Muslims. It is not enough to enjoy the beauty of Islam and the feeling of contentment being a Muslim, but it is also the duty of a Muslim to share this beauty and contentment with other people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. One of the ways to convey the message of Islam to non-Muslims is through interfaith dialogue. Disagreement about religious teachings is a very common phenomenon, Allah as the creator of the universe commands us to have interfaith dialogues as a mean to clear the misunderstandings and stereotypes among us. It is not through attacking each other from behind and demonizing each other, as this attitude will not solve our problem.

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