

## Religious Tolerance: The Key between One ASEAN One Community

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**Abstract:** Although the people in ASEAN countries comprise diverse ethnic groups and religions, there exist opportunities to develop one ASEAN Community through religious tolerance. The purpose of this paper is to propose religious tolerance as one of the keys in building “One ASEAN One Community”. This is based on a study conducted on the level of tolerance, which could help Malaysia address its religious issues in the context of a multi-religious society. The situation in Malaysia is quite similar to many other ASEAN countries. Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia seem to be having a number of inter-religious conflicts and although these cases may not be representative of a large segment of the population, it is still alarming and calls for a duly appropriate and serious response.

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### 1. Introduction

ASEAN countries share many similarities especially in terms of their societies and cultures. At the same time, they also face parallel challenges that can disturb the existence of a harmonious society. When we closely examine the cases of religious conflicts in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, it seems to highlight one matter, namely the question of tolerance.

Hence, religious conflict is not the main focus of this paper. The main aim of this paper is to propose the promotion of religious tolerance in building ‘One ASEAN One Community’. By sharing the research findings on religious tolerance, which was conducted in Malaysia, it is hoped that this can offer some solutions and help in promoting religious harmony within the ASEAN community.

#### 1.1 The Concept of Religious Tolerance

This section will discuss the key concept of ‘religious tolerance’ in order to provide a clearer picture of this important concept. Tolerance is a term, which has been assigned to many concepts such as politics, law, theology and philosophy, and analysed in relation to that particular concept. Similarly, with the concept of religious tolerance, where the notion of tolerance is attached to religion, such a concept can be analysed in the context of religion, or any of the dimensions of religion. Smart’s (1969 and 1991) six dimensions of religion can be attached and analyzed in examining how tolerant a society is in terms of socio-religious relations.

#### W. K. Jordan (1932) suggests:

‘Perhaps the finest conception of religious toleration presumes a positive attitude of mind which enables us charitably and sympathetically to hear another man whom we consider to be in error. Philosophical toleration presumes a mind which has definite and pronounced religious opinions, but which is able and willing to concede to other minds the right to retain and practise contrary religious beliefs.’

In order to achieve religious tolerance in one society, it is suggested that we find ‘common values’ in that society. ‘Common values’ mean a set of shared values which are acceptable to the respective religious teachings and cultures in the context of a multi-religious society. By identifying these common values in each religion, which are acknowledged by the followers, it could be easier to reach points of agreement that might ease any tension or disagreement.

In discussing the concept of religious tolerance, this analysis study is optimistic when looking at the potential for creating a harmonious multi-religious society. “Religion [could be] a source of personal solace and support.” as suggested by Giddens (1993). Nevertheless, we should not disregard the fact that religion “has often been the origin of intense social struggles and conflicts.”<sup>1</sup> That is why we can find evidence and analyses that blame religion as one of the key factors in social conflicts.

Religious tolerance may sound too ideal to some, especially after 9/11, when inter-religious relations in many places were strained, especially in multi-religious societies. Nevertheless, it is not something that we cannot achieve, as proven by historical evidence. Maria Rosa Menocal (2002), for example, compiled ample evidence of historical occasions in medieval Spain where a culture of tolerance had been fostered among Muslims, Jews and Christians at that time. Harold Coward (2000) also has historical evidence of Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists living in a spirit of religious tolerance at different times in their history.

### 1.2 Religious Tolerance: A Suggested Definition

After considering all the descriptions and definitions given above, we can synthesise the concept of tolerance to be used in the context of this research by saying that:

“Religious tolerance is an attitude or behaviour of willingness to allow and accept religious differences to be practised in a pluralistic society without prejudice or discrimination, even though one has the power to reject or deny it, in order to achieve well-being and a harmonious society. In this context, the allowing and acceptance of any religious differences does not imply that one becomes a believer or follower of that particular religion. In other words, everybody has freedom to believe and practise any religion. The power to reject or deny diverse religious beliefs and practices may take any form, such as using legal authority, political power, religious institutions, community pressure and individual action. Also religious tolerance does not necessarily mean that one views other religions as being equally true, but it upholds the right of others to practise their beliefs.”

The above attitude should be read in the context of inter-religious relations. So the relations ought to be, to use Akbar S. Ahmad's (1986) words, “...smoothly interacting and somehow self-

adjusting...” in order to achieve a harmonious society. Such attitudes also should be practised both between individuals as a social organism in a society, and also between religious institutions as a social organization.

In the context of socio-religious tolerance, the scope of attitude and willingness in this definition should be limited, in order to prevent our argument and analysis from going beyond its scope, such as by delving into theological tolerance, as that would bring about more debates and unresolved discussions. Also, this writer's concern is that this socio-religious discussion on tolerance could move on to the matter of political tolerance, which is not the intention of this research, though the thin line of separation between the two seems blurred, as socio-religious tolerance is inter-connected with the political system of any one society.

In the context of tolerance, one should also consider both individual and collective contentment, because when you are willing to tolerate the differences of others, to some extent you have to sacrifice your own contentment or that of your group. We have to bear in mind that tolerance is not about equality, fairness or neutrality; rather, it is about managing social relations to avoid tension between two or more sides in moments of disagreement. Tolerance is also a matter of balance, requiring consensual actions on both sides to ensure the desired outcome by assent rather than force.

### 2. Tolerance – The Malaysian Experience

Based on the suggested definition and instrument developed which were focused on social aspects of religion, a survey was conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor in 2008. The aim was to measure the level of religious tolerance in both these territories of Malaysia. It involved 574 respondents. The religious backgrounds of the respondents were as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1. Respondents' Distribution by Religion**

Religion	Frequency	%	Cumulative
Islam	300	52.3	52.3
Buddhism	97	16.9	69.2
Hinduism	53	9.2	78.4
Christianity	87	15.2	93.6
Sikhism	15	2.6	96.2
Taoism/Confucianism	19	3.3	99.5
Others	3	.5	100.0
Total	574	100.0	

Based on the table above, the majority of respondents were Muslims, followed by Buddhists and Christians. The percentage of respondents closely represented the religious composition of Malaysian population in general.

Table 2 below shows the overall level of socio-religious tolerance measured by mean.

**Table 2: Mean (Level) of Overall Socio-Religious Tolerance by Religion**

Religion	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Islam	3.4761	300	0.56908
Buddhism	3.6610	97	0.61487
Hinduism	3.8996	53	0.62804
Christianity	4.0897	87	0.50335
Sikhism	4.3040	15	0.40954
Taoism/Confucianism	3.6589	19	0.53738
Others	3.9200	3	0.84664
Total	3.6695	574	0.61967

The above data showed that people who embraced Sikhism had the highest level of tolerance amongst Malaysians in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor followed by Christians. Both groups scored the mean value of more than 4 out of the maximum score of 5. However the rest of the groups showed an above average score while Muslims scored the lowest. The Muslim group's reading on the level of tolerance proved that the majority group was less tolerant of the minority; a situation that occurs in many parts of the world.

The following table shows the level of religious tolerance by ethnic groups.

**Table 3: Mean (Level) of Overall Socio-Religious Tolerance by Ethnic Group**

Ethnic Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Malay	3.4889	300	0.57611
Chinese	3.7697	165	0.58285
Indian	4.0071	101	0.61244
Bumipuetra	4.1100	8	0.66134
Total	3.6695	574	0.61967

The above table shows that Bumiputerans and Indians had the highest level of religious tolerance among Malaysians in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The two groups were followed by Chinese and Malays. The overall level of religious tolerance was 3.66 out of 5 which was quite high.

### 3. Conclusion

Although the above data shown was limited in scope, it presented a general picture of the level of religious tolerance among Malaysians, particularly among those who lived in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. Overall, the respondents exhibited quite a high level of tolerance. Malaysia is country that always portray different ethnics and variety of cultures to outsiders (Kunasekaran et al. 2013). Based on the evidence provided, this writer would conclude that Malaysians are generally tolerant of a multi-religious society. By practicing a reasonably high

level of religious tolerance, the writer would suggest that this may be a strong factor in promoting social harmony in this country. This is because Malaysia is considered as one of the countries where religion is viewed as an ethnic identifier as suggested by Shamsul (2005). Such an example could be utilized by any ASEAN country in building a harmonious society through promoting religious tolerance. Apart from that, the community must also be empowered (Nikkhah, 2010) and encouraged (Aref et al, 2009) for the community to be involved in any decision making procedures regarding religious tolerance issues. Moreover, the perception of the local community plays the most important role for a governmental development program to be sustainable (Kunasekaran et al, 2011). This can be surmised based on the similarities of social setting among the various ASEAN communities.

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