

Interfaith Dialogue in the Context of Comparative Religion

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Abstract: Inter-religious dialogue among different ethnicity and social background is a unique experience especially for those who newly become believers of certain faith. *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah* (Teratak Fitrah Guidance Centre) is one of the centres actively involved in promoting the understanding of Islam for the new Muslims in Sabah to encourage them towards the building of a sound personality as a Muslim through religious classes. This paper discusses the role of Teratak Fitrah Center as a religious as well as a social body and education centre to correlate the relationship and strengthening the brotherhood of Muslim community either those who are Muslims through conversion process or those who are originally Muslim by birth. This centre is under the association of SAHABAT, an entity of converts and acts as a non-profit and voluntary-based non-government organization (NGO). The main function of SAHABAT is to seek funding for *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah*, *Rumah Kebajikan Likas* (Likas Charity Home) and conducts the social services as well as fulfilling the main objectives of the establishment of SAHABAT. This centre receives strong support from government religious institutions, independent preachers and surrounding communities. The establishment of Teratak Fitrah Centre is not only to tackle the problem of religious understanding and assist the social activities for the new Muslims but it is also responsible to promote dialogue of life which begins when the new Muslims regardless of ethnicity and social differences meet each other and share their daily activities together. Through the process of dialogue which occurs in daily life interaction, the new Muslims do not only have the chance to know their counterparts but also obtain the opportunity to be in close contact with born-Muslims that is significant in enhancing Islamic understanding in a structured manner through formal religious classes as offered by Teratak Fitrah Center as well as a mechanism to build a social integration among the Muslim community.

Key words: Teratak Fitrah Centre • Role • Dialogue of life • Interaction • Religious classes • New Muslim-Muslim-non-Muslim • Sabah.

INTRODUCTION

Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah (Teratak Fitrah Guidance Centre) is one of the centre actively involve in promoting the understanding of Islam for the new Muslims in Sabah. It is also responsible to encourage them towards the building of a sound personality as a Muslim through religious classes. This centre is under the association of SAHABAT, an entity of converts and acts as a non-profit and voluntary-based non-government organization (NGO). The main function of SAHABAT is

to seek funding for *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah*, *Rumah Kebajikan Likas* (Likas Charity Home) and conducts the social services as well as fulfilling the main objectives of the establishment of SAHABAT. This centre receives strong support from government religious institutions, independent preachers and surrounding communities. The establishment of Teratak Fitrah Centre is not only to tackle the problem of religious understanding and run the social activities for the new Muslims but it is also responsible to promote dialogue of life.

The dialogue of life in the centre begins when the new Muslims regardless of ethnicity and social differences meet each other and share their daily life activities together. Through the process of dialogue of life which occurs in daily life interaction, the new Muslims not only have a chance to know their counterparts but also have an opportunity to be closed contact with born-Muslims. The interaction between new Muslims and born-Muslims is significant to help enhance Islamic understanding in a structured manner through formal religious classes as offered by Teratak Fitrah Center as well as a mechanism to build a social integration among the Muslim community. Hence, this paper discusses the role of Teratak Fitrah Center as a religious body as well as a social body and education centre to correlate the relationship and strengthening the brotherhood of Muslim community either those who are Muslims through conversion process or those who are originally Muslim by birth.

The Concept of Inter-religious Dialogue: Basically, dialogue is a process of conversation through speech [11]. It is a reciprocal relationship in which two or more parties endeavor to express accurately what they mean and listen to and respect what the other person says [15]. Dialogue began when one faith first became aware of the other [14]. Dialogue has taken on many meanings, but Leonard Swidler points out that dialogue is a two-way communication between persons who hold significantly differing views on a subject, with the purpose of learning more truth about the subject from the other [20]. This implies that inter-religious dialogue is a conscious process which involves a deliberate intention of interaction and learning. Hence, inter-religious dialogue aims to influence the participants not to remain static in cocoons but to come out of their shells and to discover the means by which they can improve in themselves and in their mutual relationships [22].

In multi-religious context, dialogue refers to “all positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom” [24]. It is because dialogue promotes positive perception on the others. It is explained by Francis Cardinal Arinze that inter-religious dialogue is a meeting of mind and heart between followers of various religions. It is a walking together towards truth and a working together in projects

of common concern. Only through dialogue, we can increase our understanding and decrease prejudice and negative perceptions on the others. Moreover, the more we can gain knowledge of ‘the other’, the more we increase the opportunity to better understand each other.

Although man is classified according to his own ethnic, cultural and religious activities, yet he is created by the same and the Only One God [7]. Therefore, in Islamic point of view, all human beings are brothers who descend from the same parents, Adam and Eve. This argument supported by some verses of al-Quran as highlighted by Fatmir Mehdi Shehu [7]:

Surah Al-nisa: 1 (“O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women;...” And in Surah *al-A'raf*: 189, “It is He who created you from a single person and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love).” And “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female....” Surah *al-Hujurat*: 13.

In order to show this brotherly affiliation, man must engage himself in a friendly religious communication or conversation, which enables him to come closer to the others and as a result to solve the modern crises. Such kind of religious conversation that is called “inter-religious dialogue” has been practiced by members of different religious traditions from time to time and from one generation to another. Although such religious conversation used to be practiced before by many people, as a notion, it came into existence only by the end of the nineteenth century, where many religious authorities and individuals in an explicit form by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), held in Rome by the Catholic Church. This does not ignore the fact that the meaning and practice of such notions did exist before this council. It is of a great importance to mention here the place known as Karakorum¹, where on 30 May 1254 the scene of the first world inter-religious conversation in modern history took place between representatives of the East and West. This religious dialogue that lasted for a whole day was staged by the great Khan and there were four groups of people involved: the Latins (the Catholic Christians), the Nestorian Christians, the Buddhists and the Muslims. The theme of this religious conversation focused on God’s being [7].

¹Karakorum was the Mongol capital of the time when the great inter-religious debate or conversation between the followers of different tradition took place.

Inter-religious dialogue can be an ongoing process or means to an action or an end in itself. For the purpose of discussion, this paper means inter-religious dialogue as a process in which people at grassroots level are engaged in interacting, discussing and exchanging views, beliefs and ideas in their daily activities as they come across people of other faith in their jobs or business or otherwise. Hence, the purpose of inter-religious dialogue in this context is to increase understanding between religious communication and thus to remove ignorance about each other (Joshua Raja <http://www.reformiert-online.net>)

Dialogue can be seen in variety of forms. Diana Eck identifies six types of dialogue; parliamentary dialogue, institutional dialogue, theological dialogue, dialogue in community or dialogue of life, spiritual dialogue and inner dialogue [5]. Parliamentary dialogue refers to the large assemblies created for interfaith discussion. The earliest example was the World Parliament of Religions convened in Chicago in 1893. These types of meetings have become more frequent under the auspices of multi-faith organizations such as *the World Conference on Religion and Peace* and *the British-based World Congress of Faiths*. Institutional dialogue includes both the organized efforts by particular religious institutions and in Southeast Asia, governments of nations that initiate and facilitate various kinds of dialogue. In terms of institutions, this type of dialogue seeks to establish and nurture channels of communication between various religious communities. This category encompasses much of the work carried out through the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) and the Vatican, *the World Council of Muslims for Inter-religious Relations* and others. Although institutional inter-religious dialogue is a very important aspect of interfaith encounters, it is also beset with the problems of history and evangelization (for Christians) and *da'wa* (for Muslims). The dilemma has been that of maintaining faith on the one hand and interreligious outreach on the other.

A theological dialogue refers to particular elements found in interfaith encounter as well as the larger process of reflection among Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and others. It includes structured meetings in which theological and philosophical issues are the primary focus of discussion. While, spiritual dialogue is concerned with deepening spiritual life through interfaith encounter. This type of dialogue does not struggle overtly with theological problems or issues between communities of faith. Rather, it is designed as a means to

nourish, expand and develop spirituality or the spiritual dimension of religious life. On the other hand, inner dialogue takes place in each of us. It is operative in various dialogical encounters as well as in our process of thinking and reflection. It is intimately bound up with growth and change at the development of one's religious perspectives. It takes place in our minds and hearts when we read the scriptures of another religious tradition, or when we hear their call to prayer.

Dialogue in community or dialogue of life is inclusive categories that encompass most of the unstructured interaction between people of different traditions. These takes place in markets and on street corners, at times of festivals, in the course of civic or humanitarian projects and at times of community or family crisis. This sort of dialogues takes place as people in communities think together about violence, militarism, or economic depression. These dialogues happen spontaneously or of organized, concentrate on practical issues of common concern. Unfortunately, these spontaneous dialogues are rarely recognized and celebrated for their value and organized community dialogues are more often precipitated by a problem or crisis.

Dialogue of Life as a New Paradigm Shift in Interreligious Dialogue: The conceptual meaning of the dialogue of life is further discussed by Cardinal Arinze, a president of *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* (PCID). At the conference of Christian-Muslim relation in Pattaya, Thailand which involved the participants of ASEAN countries, Arinze argued that in order to live in peace and harmony, to remove discrimination and to build up their societies together, instead of engaging in rivalry, allowing tensions to build up, or even outright conflict, it is necessary for Christians and Muslims to meet each other in a climate of deep mutual respect and esteem. Hence, in his speech as quoted by Douglas Pratt Azinze states that:

The four forms of dialogue that had emerged as the de facto standard Catholic understanding, namely the dialogue of life, wherein participants live and work together and enrich one another through faithful practice of the values of religion, without the necessity of formal discussion; the dialogue of action, or social engagement, which aims at cooperation for the promotion of integral human development and for the liberation of people; the dialogue of religious experience, wherein rooted in their respective traditions,

partners in dialogue share their spiritual patrimonies, for instance with regard to prayer and meditation, faith and the ways of searching for God; and discursive dialogue, or the dialogue of theological exchange, in which specialist experts from both sides of dialogical encounter exchange information on their respective religious beliefs and heritages and reflect together how the actual problems of humankind can be faced. [6]

The concept of dialogue of life as mentioned above implies that it is a form of interreligious dialogue that is within the reach of anyone who lives or interacts with believers in a different religion. This statement further described by Matthew Ugwoji that dialogue of life is an interreligious relationship at the level of the ordinary relational situations of daily life: family, school, place of social or cultural contact, village meetings, workplace, politics, trade or commerce [22]. When neighbors of differing religions are open to one another, when they share their projects and hopes, concerns and sorrows, they are engaging in dialogue of life. They do not necessarily discuss religion, but they draw on the values of their different beliefs and traditions. Further, this kind of dialogue implies concern, respect and hospitality toward the other. It leaves room for the other person's identity, modes of expression and values.

Similarly, for Cyprian Ubaka describes that this type of dialogue is an informal one where people express their views, share their joys and sorrows and discuss their problem freely [21]. They do this to learn from one another as well as to establish a loving relationship with one another. It is interesting to note that even at this level some form of discussion on one's relationship with God takes place. This is because people are basically religious and matters of religious interest form part and parcel of their daily discussion. While, Volker Kuester describes that the dialogue of life takes place in the concrete living-together of people with different religious background [13]. Often, the borderlines of adherence to a religion go right through traditional large families or town communities. The people experience the rites and festivals of the various religions when they are with their family or neighbors and sometimes take part themselves. Even in urban situations, such experiences are possible. This religious living-together does not necessarily demand detailed knowledge of the principles of the other religions in question. The dialogue of life aims at a good living together. It is therefore, getting to know each other regardless any religion and interact with the other in daily life activities is part of the process of dialogue of life.

This is further explained by J. Mark Hensman that the dialogue of life, on the other hand is of different in nature [9]. It was always there. It was unearthed, recognized acknowledged rather than constructed. It is about how people live: alongside each other, against each other. They rub shoulders. It is sometimes concretely, sometimes abrasively. The dialogue of life can be messy. It does not easily fit into agendas. It simply happens. Matthew Ugwoji goes on to describe that dialogue on this level is a way of breaking down cultural biases and prejudices [22]. It is a way of getting to know people of other faiths on human level. This form of engagement will lead to next identities as dialogue of collaboration where adherents of various religions cooperate for the promotion and human development and liberation in all its forms. This form of dialogue is exemplified in social concerns inspired by religious motives, such as in the study and execution of development of projects and in initiatives to foster justice and peace. This reasoning will constitute good grounds for peaceful coexistence.

In this respect, the concept dialogue of life can be understood as a form of inter-religious dialogue which involves the engagement of diverse religious society. It emphasizes the elements of living together, daily life interaction, getting to-know-each other and strives together for living harmoniously beyond the religious differences. Hence, dialogue of life is a broad concept, its definition vary according to the discourse and depends on the nature of participants and the subject that they discuss together. It is a form of inter-religious dialogue at the grass root level and aim at common concern of people living together that is culturally diverse in their daily life activities.

It is therefore, the dialogue of life differs from any other kinds of interreligious dialogue that formally conducted by religious elites on the discussion of theological aspects. The difference is further explained by Fatmir Mehdi Shehu:

In a daily conversation between two or more people with different views regarding the nature of material well-being as well as the nature of the Ultimate being, the principles of respect and understanding of one another's opinions and views remain crucial. However, the daily conversation that takes place between individuals differs from religious communication that runs in inter-religious dialogue between two complete different mindsets that aim to the religious claim of a common Ultimate Truth, that is, God. In this sense, interreligious dialogue is more advanced than the daily

conversation. The former takes place according to the official arrangement, while the latter runs on individual bases and is unofficial, i.e., when a Muslim lives next to a Christian fellow and they share a daily conversation related to their daily life as well as to their common religious values found in their traditions.[7]

The above statement explains that dialogue of life is one of the component in inter-religious dialogue operates at the grass roots level. It emphasizes on non-elite participants who discuss any matters pertaining not only on religious issues but also the other theme of social issues. This kind of inter-religious dialogue provides different method from any structured dialogue which is normally conducted in round table discussion. It can be said that dialogue of life is a spontaneous interaction occurs in daily life activities in any venue at any time. However, the dialogue of life still have its similarity with any other kinds of dialogue. It is because any forms of interreligious dialogue either at structural level or daily life interaction, the aim is promoting mutual understanding, building bridge, inculcating tolerance and enhancing respect with the others who are different in religious affiliations. Therefore, the dialogue of life is a new paradigm shift of religious communication nowadays that is necessarily aim for enhancing unity and promoting positive interaction within the diverse religious society. Such an effort can be seen through the social and religious activities conducted by Teratak Fitrah Guidance Center in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

The Role of Teratak Fitrah in Promoting Dialogue of Life: Teratak Fitrah (TF) as described before is a guidance center for new Muslims not only to enhance their understanding on Islam, but also to promote correlation among Muslim community in Sabah. It can be said that TF is a one-stop center to build bridge between new Muslims with their other brothers of born Muslims. Furthermore, it is the role of TF to inculcate the high spirit of Islamic awareness to the new Muslims so that they do not feel isolated or marginalized by the others. It is through the process of daily life interaction, the TF can play its own role to promote dialogue of life among new Muslims and the other Muslim community at large. This can be done through the process of socialization either in the classroom or any other social activities provided by the TF. Before we go further on the discussion of the role of Teratak Fitrah, it is better to look at the background of TF as a guidance center for new Muslims in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

The Background of Teratak Fitrah: Beginning with the devoted work of one individual who was concerned with the education of new Muslim brethrens in Sabah, there emerged a class for the purpose of giving guidance for the new converts named *Teratak Fitrah*. This guidance center is built on February 2nd, 2002 which consisted of only 30 students in its first intake (Interview with Mrs. Sumaimah: June 2000).

The same date was also memorable since the class of *Teratak Fitrah* was officiated by YAB Datuk Lajim Hj.Okin. This programme was inspired by Ustazah Nordinah Alwi, Ustaz Sarip Abdul and the assistance of a number of instructors from *Kolej Ibukota* (KIK). There were among the leading and important individuals who were the backbone of the establishment as well as contributing enormously to the founding and management of the class in the early stage. This programme was initially a joint venture between CIST KIK-JHEAINS and supported by USIA and BAKISA. In January 2003 this programme was placed under the *Ukhwah* unit, a sub-unit of JHEAINS da'wah, although it was still under the management of Ustazah Nordinah Alwi with the assistance of a number of volunteers until October 2004. The *Teratak Fitrah* Programme was designed specifically to provide guidance to the new converts who recently embraced Islam (Interview with Mrs. Sumaimah: June 2009).

The chronological development of Teratak Fitrah as an Islamic guidance center for Muslim converts can be traced out as follows:

Early 2002-2003: The *Teratak Fitrah* Programme started at *Kolej Ibukota* Kota Kinabalu under the supervision of Ustazah Nordinah Alwi with the help of instructors from KIK, JHEAINS and students of KIK who took the subject of Islamic charity as part of their extra-curricular activities. Students from *Sekolah Menengah* Toh Puan Hajjah Rahmah (Toh Puan Hajjah Rahmah Secondary School) and *Ma'had Tahfiz* (Tahfiz College) had also contributed their services as volunteers. During this period, the funding of this programme relied solely on the sincere donations of a number of generous and caring individuals.

Mid 2003-april 2004: This programme had to be transferred to *Sekolah Menengah* Toh Puan Hajjah Rahmah due to the increasing number of students and the problem of insufficient classes. During that time the volunteers from *Kolej Ibukota* still came to help, along with volunteers from *Sekolah Menengah* Toh Puan

Hajjah Rahmah. The class continued until April 2004. The programme had also started to attract the attention of the *unit zakat* Kota Kinabalu (Islamic charity unit) and the unit began to dispense assistant.

April 2004-april 2007: In April 2004, the class had to be transferred once again and it was to *Masjid Bandaraya* Kota Kinabalu (Kota Kinabalu City Mosque). Starting with the classroom in the mosque and later moved to the women's prayer room upstairs. It is undeniable that the space at *Masjid Bandaraya* was spacious and comfortable, though there are some problems that cannot be avoided. The class was carried out for about two years. In October 2004, Ustazah Nordinah handed over the management of *Teratak Fitrah* to Mrs. Salawati Fan because of the offer she received to further studies in the Malaysian Peninsular and subsequently the offer to work at JAKIM Kuala Lumpur. During that time the management of *Teratak Fitrah* was rather shaky since the transition of the management and Mrs. Salawati had referred the issue to JHEAINS. As a result the *da'wah* unit of JHEAINS took action by instructing Ustaz Awaludin and Ustazah Maria to assist in the supervising *Teratak Fitrah* class.

May 2007: For the umpteenth time the class had to be moved and it was *Madrasah Islamiah* Negeri Sabah (Islamic Madrasah of Sabah) at Sembulan in May 2007 and until now the class is still going on although there have been a few problems such as cramped classroom, insufficient hall for gathering, open space for women ablution and a few others.

Besides all these obstacles, the class of *Teratak Fitrah* never ceased to operate. It kept on going and expanding with the aim of providing basic education and guidance to our new brethren in Sabah who are thirsty for religious knowledge and still not familiar with the lifestyle of a Muslim. Apart from that, *Teratak Fitrah* also has a welfare home for new converts located in *Kampung Likas* Kota Kinabalu which functions as a shelter home for converts who have family problems. It is also a center for studying al-Quran, conducting *da'wah* activities as well as a place for generating the economy of new converts. Until now *Teratak Fitrah* has more than 120 students and the latest in 2010, a total of 208 recent convert students had completed basic education.

The Emergence of SAHABAT: The initial existence of *Teratak Fitrah* that focuses on guidance programme was slowly expanded to *da'wah* activities. However it was limited as it was not an organization that moves freely but

just a class under JHEAINS. Hence in November 2005, JHEAINS proposed the establishment of a body that can help in the management of converts' affairs and their socio-economic development. As a result, on January 28th, 2006 a meeting was held for the purpose of appointing a committee of SAHABAT sponsorship (Interview with Puan Sumaimah: June 2009).

On January the 17th of 2007, the first general meeting of SAHABAT was held as well as the founding of *Pertubuhan Kebajikan Saudara Kita* (The Organization for the Welfare of New Converts) or SAHABAT. There is a storm in every sea and such is with SAHABAT who in carrying various programs, also met with all kinds of challenges. Among the most serious challenge was the lack of funding to implement programs, since SAHABAT is only a non-government organization and operates on a voluntary basis. That is why the high committee of SAHABAT has to work hard in ensuring the success of the programmes in their respective sub-units. Thankfully, although faced with hardships while being relatively new and inexperienced, due to the efforts and commitment of the high committee and members of SAHABAT, various programmes and activities were able to be carried out such as the bazaar to raise funds, SAHABAT's expedition with Ustaz Tuan Hj. Nicholas Sylvester, SAHABAT exhibition, Qurban feast, charity/patients visits, management of funeral rites of new converts, Yasin recitation programme and lectures, educational activities and a number of other activities like camping, storytelling programme and others.

The programs left significant impact in strengthening the dialogue of life dialogue among the community of new converts in Sabah. It is the vision for SAHABAT to equip the new Muslims with integrated knowledge, sound personality, praiseworthy moral values and conducts, sustainable socio-economic feature, global-minded and excellent in aspects of the world and hereafter.

The Conversion to Islam as a Process of Dialogue of Life:

Dialogue of life as experienced by new Muslims can be described as a process in which people at the grassroots level engage in interacting, discussing and exchanging views, beliefs and ideas in their daily activities. Dialogue of life begins through the process of socialization, interaction and encountering the others in workplaces, schools, markets at any places and any time. The elements of interaction and encountering the other are closely related to the two elements of stages in religious conversion process suggested by Lewis Rambo [17]. It is further elaborate by Anne Sophie Roald in the theory of conversion to Islam. Roald states that:

In Islamic conversion process, the stage of 'encounter' is often the first stage occurring earlier than Rambo's model suggests. The reverse is true of the stage of 'crisis', which comes early, often as a triggering factor in Rambo's model, but usually after and as a consequence of conversion if it occurs in the Islamic conversion model. The other stages in Rambo's model are of a more general nature, concerned with the levels of interaction or commitment to the new faith. In the Islamic context these differ. Some turn to Islam for pragmatic reasons such as marriage. These stages are thus hard to group together in general patterns. [18]

However, the conversion process either conversion to Islam or conversion to any other religions often relate to an aspect of love, friendship or just contact with someone from the faith in question. In psychological perspectives, the conversion process usually described as those who are searching for the soul [12]. Anne Sophie Roald used the term "searching for the truth" to describe the phenomenon of new Muslim's approach to Islam. In Malaysian context of conversion to Islam as described by a well known motivator, Fadhilah Kamsah, states that a frequent observation to the lifestyle of Muslim becomes a major factor of conversion to Islam. Hence, conversion process emphasizes the elements of encounter, intermingle, interaction and observation which then attract the interest of the others to know more about the difference and the uniqueness of certain religions. This process occurs in everyday activities which is best described as dialogue of life in multi-faith society.

Dialogue of life is significantly related to the inter-religious relation as experienced by new Muslims. It is because the new Muslim are individuals who have close contact with non-Muslim family of origin and previously used to practice non-Islamic elements of religious life. Nevertheless, as they convert to Islam they are directly become a member of Muslim society. Therefore, they do a tremendous job of bridging the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims. Esra Ozyurek, an Associate Professor of Anthropologist, from the University of California, San Diego argues that (<http://www.spiegel.de>):

German converts to Islam make a valuable contribution to dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslims. Rather than being a threat, ethnic German converts to Islam are in fact a very valuable asset to Germany. They serve as a bridge between immigrant Muslims and non-Muslim Germans and by doing so they help to create a well-integrated German society.

The same goes to Jane I. Smith which states that a significant number of women who are involved in dialogue are converts to Islam [19]. One convert to Islam reports that she is often asked to participate in such sessions because she can speak the language of Christians as well as explain Islam. Kate Zebiri further describes the role of Muslim converts as 'bridge-builders' especially in the sense of contributing to a more positive and accurate understanding of Islam in the wider society [23]. Zebiri further elaborates that:

Converts have a unique potential to act not just as critics but also as cultural mediators and are seemingly well placed to straddle many divides: Muslim-non-Muslim; indigenous-immigrant; Islam-the West. In Europe as a whole, converts have played a prominent role in many sectors of society; as representatives of Islam, translators, publishers, Arabists and Islamicists, personnel in Islamic organization etc. It is because due to their superior communication skills and knowledge of society. [23]

The role of new Muslim as mentioned above can also be applied in the Malaysian context. They can play their role in bridging the gap between native Malay-Muslim with the other non-native of non-Malay-Muslim. The close contact between Muslim and non-Muslim in their daily life interaction indirectly make them able to explain Islam and its differences with the other religions. Through the process of inter-faith marriage as commonly practiced by new Muslim in Sabah, Malaysia, the members of family are able to share the culture of the other that they are not familiar with. By sharing and living together, the non-Muslim family of new Muslim are directly expose to the religious teachings of Islam whether it is related to the performance of religious obligation or religious boundaries of Islam. This situation will eventually reduce the negative perception towards Islam and breaking down cultural biases on the other religion. Matthew Ugwoji explained that:

"dialogue on this level is a way of breaking down cultural biases and prejudices. It is a way of getting to know people of other faiths on a human level. This form of engagement will lead to next identities as dialogue of collaboration where adherents of various religions cooperate for the promotion and human development and liberation in all its forms. This form of dialogue is exemplified in social concerns inspired by religious

motives, such as in the study and execution of development of projects and in initiatives to foster justice and peace. This reasoning will constitute good grounds for peaceful coexistence.” [22]

The interconnection between the process of conversion to Islam with dialogue of life is best described by the following case studies of new Muslims in Teratak Fitrah. Answers given by new Muslims are collected from the filling forms of their personal biodata from 2006 until 2010. The form is required to be kept as a members' particular of Teratak Fitrah organisation. The answers given describe the reasons for conversion to Islam which can be categorized into three main themes; conversion due to the factors of friendship, marriage and self-awareness.

Friendship: I embraced Islam on my own will. The intention to embrace Islam began even since I was in school. Other reasons, maybe the *adzan* that is mesmerizing when prayer time comes. Exposed to the Islamic education since I was at school. I was very fascinated with the celebration of *Eid*. The way Muslims pray is more modest and cover their *aurat*.

I embraced Islam because of my belief in the Allah the One and Prophet Muhammad as His messenger. Although all my siblings have embraced Islam. However they never pressured me. The freedom of choice was totally my own. Since young I was attracted to Islam, but my mother and my late father insisted that I accept their religion which is Christianity. At that young age I was forced to comply with their wish, especially since I was the youngest in the family. I vowed to myself that one day I'll make the decision to embrace Islam. During that period I was taught a lot about Islam through friends in school. I was comfortable with the beauty of Islam, but due to my love for my parents I just kept it to myself. As a result, I was trapped with myself. Each day the pressure kept increasing. What's more I worked in KK and lived alone. It was even more painful when my late father bequeathed that I should convert to Christian. The pressure became heavier to the point that I believed dying was the easier option. Praise to Allah on 25th of December 2004, I was determined to convert to Islam and was not willing to put it off even for another day. By Allah, I will not retreat even one step. My life, my death is for the religion of Allah, which is Islam.

I have been interested in the religion since school after I saw my firends being excited learning religious subjects. Apart from that maybe it is the grace of Allah who guided me to choose and embrace this sacred religion.

While I was a Christian, I felt like there was something missing, where all the doubts in my mind was not fully answered. Then I met a dear friend who was a Muslim and I always asked about the teachings of Islam. From there my heart started to incline towards knowing and understanding what Islam is. After I was convinced of the sanctity of the religion, I embraced it.

I was born and raised in the Christian or Roman Catholic faith. When I was an orphan, got pregnant before marriage and left alone, I became a person who did not trust anyone, did not believe in God and living freely. One day, I followed my friend back to her village and her parents knew about me and my problems and suggested that I embrace Islam. It was in 1994 that I did so and I tried to learn the religion. At first it was hard for me to believe that Islam can change my life but I tried my best and I kept on learning more and more about Islam and finally I became religious and a God-fearing person. I hope that one day I'll be able to meet my two siblings and close family so that I can bring them to the right path and embrace the true religion of Islam with a God called Allah the Most Merciful and Loving. That was the reason for my conversion to Islam, the religion of the true God.

Since school I have mingled with Muslim students. From there I started to study and became interested with the way of life of the Muslims. However, my intention to convert to Islam was not fulfilled since my parents would not allow me. So only at the age of 35, I got the chance to embrace Islam.

While studying in Selangor I started to mix with a lot of Muslim friends. In the period of three years in their midst, I started to become interested in knowing about Islam. Every day I will hear the call of *adzan* and watched my friends pray and wear *hijab* as well as fasting for a month in Ramadan. All of these have opened my heart to embrace Islam. I wanted to experience for myself all the practices and so far, praise to Allah I am more at peace and happier.

When I was in school I mingled a lot with Muslim brothers and my heart was opened to know Islam better.

Marriage: 1. Islam is a religon that practices prayers and a life that is sanctified, clean and pure. This has attracted my heart and soul to get closer to Islam until I met a

Muslim woman who is now my fiancée. She has also indirectly given me the opportunity to embrace Islam.

Interested with the religion of Islam, I made the decision to embrace it in 2003. At that time I already had one child and separated from my husband. After a year embracing Islam, I met with my current husband and it was due to his encouragement that I am attending the class for new converts to build my knowledge of Islam.

Actually I had been interested in learning more about Islam since before. But I did not know how. Until I met my future husband. And he was the one who guided me with the help of his family.

- Married to a Muslim.
- My own willingness and marriage.
- Want to know about Islam. Embraced Islam willingly and sincerely to get closer to Allah and know Allah better. Apart from that, I also married my husband who is a Muslim.
- The desire to embrace Islam has been in me a long time, even before getting married but it was not actualized because of marriage. After I was left by my wife only I got the chance to embrace it. It was not because of disappointment, but just fulfilling my previous intention. Being left by my wife is not an excuse, but just doing what I have intended to do even before this.
- I converted to Islam because of my husband. I applied to this guidance center because since getting married I have never learnt about prayers and my husband did not teach me because there is no time. I have asked how to teach me before but he refused. I only knew of this class from my own nephew. If not, I would have never known there is a class like this. I hope with attending this center I would be able to learn more about Islam. Before this, I have read books on ablution and prayers booklet. But I felt that my knowledge is still not enough.

Self-Awareness:

- I embraced Islam because to me, Islam is a religion that does not distinguish the status or standard of living among humans. Indeed I embraced this religion with a sincere heart and indescribable feelings. Before embracing Islam, I was very interested in stories of prophets published in the media. At that time I thought how noble Islam was once. I was also very fascinated with the struggle of Prophet Muhammad

who fought for Islam despite the many obstacles especially from the Quraish people who were willing to boycott his family. Starting from that, I was interested in learning more about Islam, apart from its glorious history. I also thought that Islam places an emphasis on the progress of the *ummah* and this religion is indeed pure and sanctified. With that I embraced Islam open heartedly and willingly.

- I embraced Islam willingly and without coercion. Through this conversion, I sense the dream to achieve success in this world and the hereafter because this religion gives guidance to get closer to Allah in every moment until the end of life in order to qualify oneself to paradise promised by Allah for his obedient slaves.
- I converted to Islam based on my own heart's desire because I was attracted/motivated towards the beauty of Islam and the laws and practices of Islam. Practicing Islam can give peace and patience, faith and piety to me as well as make me closer to the Almighty God in life.
- Heart is opened to know and practice Islam.
- Interested in converting to Islam since young.
- The time came for me to embrace Islam because I am convinced that Islam is the religion blessed by Allah.
- Actually I was interested in Islam before coming to Sabah. But when I came here, I saw how Muslims when worshipping are well dressed, clean, in white and covers the *aurat*, my heart began to say, "What if I embrace Islam?" and it got stronger when I was listening at Islamic ceremonies such as *kenduri doa selamat* (prayer giving thanks), *kenduri arwah* (prayer for the deceased) and when they recite Fatihah (the opening chapter of the Quran), my heart becomes calmer and liking it even though I did not know any Arabic. From there I started asking an aunt who lives at Kota Marudu. Can I convert to Islam? Aunt said, "Most definitely... and my aunt managed the ceremony for my conversion. From there I was pleased and satisfied because my wish came true and I am thankful to Allah although I am not a Malaysian there is still those who are willing to help me. Praise be to Allah and these are the reasons I converted to Islam.
- Before this, in 2007, I once dreamt that I wore *hijab* but I ignored it because I thought it was just a dream. In the middle of 2008, I thought of embracing Islam but I was not 100 percent ready. In the beginning of 2009, I realized that my soul really wanted to embrace

Islam. From there I started buying books about Islam and when I read the stories of the prophets, my heart seemed to know Islam and I made the decision to convert to Islam on 4.9.2009. Apparently Islam was not difficult and I am happy to be one of the converts and my family supports me although my religion is different from theirs. Thankfully the road to a religion that was waiting for me to embrace it and learn more about it was made easy for me.

- I embraced Islam based on my own choice and will. Islam is the most challenging religion for me to learn because it uses a lot of Arabic words compared to Malay. However, after learning more about Islam bit by bit, I felt that there are a lot of benefits that I have gained from its lessons. And my heart is always calm and it helps me when I am uneasy and anxious. That is why it was not wrong for me to embrace Islam as it brought a lot of goodness to me. For example in terms of interactions, regulations and modest dressings.

The data presented are the result of accumulation of answers to the questions posted to every new Muslims at Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah Sabah. There are various answers given by every Muslim converts in regard to their reasons of converting to Islam. The driving factors have been collected from the year 2006 until 2010 and are still in the form of raw data, which are the original text and writing expressed by the Muslim converts themselves. From the collection, there are 205 answers from 205 individual Muslim converts. According to Ustazah Sumaimah an officer from SAHABAT, there are 208 new Muslim converts registered under SAHABAT, with the youngest at the age of 18 while the oldest is 75 years old. Women accounted for the largest numbers of individual converts. Based on the answers given, there are three (3) converts who have not stated their reasons of conversion and it is believed that they are illiterate. (Interview with Mrs. Sumaimah: June 2009).

However this does not affect the findings of the study, since based on preliminary survey of the answers, many of them gave almost similar answer for the reasons of conversion to Islam. As stated above, the answers given - friendship, marriage and self-awareness - are built on the basis of interaction and encountering the others. From the experience of interaction with the other Muslim, the converts began to know Islam. In other words, the introduction to Islam started from making friends and having affair with Muslim. These two factors become most of the influential factors of conversion to Islam. As study showed by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (2006: 27):

“crucial for many of the converts were their initial encounters with Muslims – friends, classmates, boyfriends, spouses, acquaintances and neighbors who took the time and had the patience to explain, to mentor and guide”.

Based on the answers given by the community of converts at Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah, the preliminary conclusion is that conversion took place due to the process of dialogue of life that correlate the relationship between the converts and their other Muslim friends. This can be analyzed from daily life interaction in the form of mingling with friends and getting marriage with the Muslim spouse. It is also through the method of observation on daily life activities on conducive surrounding of Islamic culture with the constant call to prayers that eventually opens the hearts of the converts to know more about Islam. Besides that, befriending with Muslim gave the opportunity for the converts to access some Islamic reading materials on the stories of prophets and Islamic history. All of these factors become a push factor to new Muslim to have self-awareness to search for the truth offered by the other religions.

The daily life interaction as experienced by new Muslims shows that the dialogue of life began at the pre-conversion stage. It can be seen from a situational dialogue based on the concept '*li ta'arafu*' (getting to know each other), which is a model of inter-faith relation as stated by al-Qu'an in Surah *al-Hujurat* (49:13). The principle of '*li ta'arafu*' or getting to know each other recognizes brotherhood ties between Muslims. While getting to know non-Muslim refers to *al-Sulh* (peace) with the purpose of building and fostering peaceful co-existence (Andek Masnah Andek Kelawa 1998). This principle of knowing each other is also an important element in the model of Muslim-Christian relation suggested by Jane. I Smith (2007) through the concept of '*getting to know you*'. Through anthropological approach, Merryl Wyn Davies (1992) stated that '*Knowing One Another*' is a dialogue process that creates introductory relations between human beings.

The dialogue of life is one of the form of inter-faith dialogue that involves all parties (or anyone) who live together and display the interaction between believers of different faiths. It is a form of inter-relationship that happened at the level of interaction often faced in daily life. Volker Kuester explains that the concept of dialogue of life happens based on four characteristics of life; the first is living together whether at the neighbourhood context or a multi-religion family. Second, dialogue that

does not require deep understanding of the other faiths. Third, the intention of living harmoniously together. Fourth, consensus between adherents of different religions motivated by desire and good will and dialogue takes place in a number of series [13]. Based on the answers given by the converts studying in Teratak Fitrah, it is evident that the four characteristics of dialogue of life as forwarded by Volker Kuester, colour the dialogue of life in Sabah multi-religious society [13]. The process of dialogue of life through knowing the others and intermingling together eventually led the converts became familiar with the daily practice of Islam. Gradually, the converts attracted to embrace Islam either through relational factors (friendship and marriage) or rational factors (self-awareness).

This social phenomenon is further described by Ahmad Sunawari Long that the dialogue of life happens when the members of a community try to live beyond the borders of their cluster [1]. They live openly and neighborly, share the sadness and pain without being restricted to discuss issues pertaining to the scope of religion. The members of the society live side by side in a neighborhood or village and cooperate together regardless any religious adherents. In this aspect, dialogue begins with encountering the others in daily life interaction. Moreover, dialogue of life is not similar to dialogue of discourse that has a structured method according to certain format, agenda, procedure and participant. In contrast, the method of dialogue of life is to focus on the dialogue that involves life experience and tells the story of religious narrative that display shared values.

Based on the definition of the concept of dialogue of life that is closely related to daily interactions of adherents from different religions, dialogue in the context of multi-religious society is not only demanding tolerance for the harmonious living together but also affects the conduct of influencing each other and prone to mutually learn from each other. Relatively, there will be individuals who will be 'exposed' and 'affected' with this social phenomenon which will eventually led to the religious transformation of that individual. Based on the study by Ali Kose (1996) on the phenomenon of new converts in Britain, it shows that the early exposure of new converts to Islam started at the pre-conversion stage when they met and mingled closely with Muslims. Through interaction, their Muslim friends whether consciously or not will display or highlight the Islamic lifestyle and identity through daily activities such as five daily prayers, *halal* diet and good conduct with others irrespective of

religion. The process of socialization will indirectly attract the attention of friends from different religions to know and learn about something that is different from their previous religious experience. Even more so in the context of pluralistic society in Malaysia, with its expanded Islamic setting and daily interactions without any barriers of religion. This experience will definitely be familiar to the new Muslim in Malaysia especially in Sabah. This can be traced from the answers to the question of what encourage them to embrace Islam.

Relatively speaking, the point of view within the community level will change based on its direct involvement in the dialogue of life dialogue as it encourages them to gain better understanding of the others. This clarifies that dialogue of life is not meant nor intend to change a person's religion; rather the dialogue creates a space for an individual to get closer to a new transcendence and form a new understanding as well as purifies prejudices, misconceptions and doubts which existed previously. This means that the above discussion explains the concept of conversion based on the dialogue of life and it is not limited to just explain the process of religious conversion but also includes conversion of attitude, conviction and truth. This is because the two concepts display the elements of 'encountering the other' and 'interaction' which shape the thread of knowing each other and sharing among the adherents of different faiths. It is also in the phenomenon of dialogue of life people engage in daily interaction in a space not bound by time and place, as well as the projection of conducts in religious life practices that are different and considered unique and outstanding.

This situation does not only display a dialogue that is intellectual but also touches the heart and feelings. This phenomenon is obvious in the context of inter-religious relation in Sabah's society which is integrated in the sharing of the roots; speaking the same language or dialect (Sabah Malay Dialect), originating from the same state, sheltered in the same family ties, sharing the same culture and creating interaction in the same socio-economy field at the same place which is called *tamu* (agro weekly market). Based on the similarities that existed and shared in daily interactions, this phenomenon has shaped the social framework of conversion process among the new Muslims. Interaction and communication between religions form the network of dialogue called the dialogue of life.

The preliminary deduction of the answers given by the converts have shown that among the main driven factors of conversion to Islam is the interaction and

communication in inter-dialogue dimension between the converts and Muslims in the stage of pre-conversion process. These two elements catalyze the converts to know the real concept of Islam. It is through the correlation of dialogue of life, the converts build and strengthen their relationship with the other Muslim friends. The intra-dialogue within the Muslim community is conducted through various activities by *Teratak Fitrah* because it aims not only to familiarize the new Muslims with the real life of being a Muslim, but also to bind the inter-racial relationships based on one faith.

Empowerment Dialogue of Life in Religious and Social Activities at *Teratak Fitrah*: The correlation in the dialogue of life within the community level is nurtured through the efforts and activities carried out by *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah*. This can be seen through various programmes conducted such as religious guidance class, SAHABAT expeditions, *Yasin* recitation, activities of worship such as management of funeral rites, charity visits to hospitals and business activities that strengthen the endurance of the relationship between the converts as well as the volunteers. The guiding instructors also play the role of strengthening the concept of *ukhuwwah* (Islamic brotherhood) and interconnected love in the converts' community at the centre. Evidently, the correlation of dialogue of life takes place harmoniously and mutually show understanding even though the converts came from different backgrounds. Hence, the dialogue of life in the context of new Muslims at *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah* can be seen through the religious and social activities jointly organized by SAHABAT and religious department of JHEAINS.

The preliminary findings indicate that the mode and framework of dialogue of life is built upon the observations of the interactions between different religious groups in a society. For example, in creating interaction among the converts at *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah* Sabah, the Muslim instructors display the real identity of Islam to the converts through the non-verbal method by using activities that are characterized by 'performing mode'. Marcia Hermansen describes the concept of performing mode as a combination between words, actions and contexts which expresses the role of the Muslim society in practicing Islam in their daily lives wherever they are [10]. Among the activities at *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah* are the involvement of the volunteers and religious instructors with the converts in shared activist issues. For example, activating the Islamic awareness week such as charity visits to hospitals where

they visit patients to share their hearts and feelings, managing Islamic funeral rites, SAHABAT's expeditions, *Yasin* recitations and *iftar* (breaking of fast) with converts and other Muslims. (Interview with Mrs. Sumaimah: June 2009). Activities such as these combine the concerns, understanding and mutual respects as well as comprehensive acceptance of the role as Muslim and Mukmin in embracing the true teachings of Islam. All of these activities are organized for the purpose of promoting dialogue of life as a platform to enhance positive relationship and brotherhood among Muslim community.

Therefore, a closer look at the experiences of the converts at *Teratak Fitrah* revealed that it corresponds to the dialogue of life highlights the essence of its own dialogue. This is because the dialogue's core is different from the mechanism of dialogue in the community level usually held in the forms of camps and workshops. It is because the essence of dialogue of life in the context of new Muslims is so natural, spontaneous and involves not only the minds, but the hearts and emotions as well. By living together and interacting daily, new converts will also display the Islamic identity and Muslims' way of life. This situation will shape the perception of other religious adherents towards Islam through non-verbal dialogue. If the new Muslims able to perform a good conduct of Islamic teachings, the others will perceive Islam positively and accept Islam as a new guidance for the future life. Conversely, if the new Muslim not able to show a positive manner of Islam, the others will perceive Islam in negative manner and assume Islam similar to the other religions. Therefore, it can be said that the new Muslim is an 'ambassador' of Islam to convey the true message of Islam either in the verbal form or non-verbal communication.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study shows the role of *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah* in carrying out its function in religious and social activities of new Muslims in Sabah. These activities are the platform to promote dialogue of life in community level and strengthen the brotherhood among Muslims whether those are Muslims through conversion process or by birth. It is because only through the religious and social activities, the new Muslims able to interact closely with the other Muslims and see the real picture of Islam in their daily practice. It will help the new Muslims to be familiar with the teachings of Islam not only in the form of verbal communication as they gain from the religious classes but also in the non-verbal

communication through the process of socialization. Therefore, the conversion process is a dialogue of life as experienced by the new Muslims at the pre-conversion stage. Hence, the concept of conversion and dialogue is related with each other as the two concepts engage in the elements of interaction and encountering the other.

Most importantly, *Pusat Bimbingan Teratak Fitrah* is among the NGOs who are able to apply the models of dialogue of life in its effort to strengthen the *ukhuwwah* (brotherhood) among the Muslim community. The converts who received guidance at *Teratak Fitrah* are able to generate harmonious relations with other Sabah ethnics outside the scope of *Teratak Fitrah* as they understand that Islam is a religion for everyone despite the differences in cultural background, religion, identity and so forth. *Teratak Fitrah* has proven that the dialogue of life among the Muslims came about naturally and 'feelingly', transparent and smooth and able to strengthen the ties of unity in Sabah. The experience of *Teratak Fitrah* in preserving the dialogue of life among the converts community in Sabah is hopefully able to become the model for NGOs and other bodies in terms of their courses and support activities.

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