FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS IN SUSTAINING INTER-RELIGIOUS HARMONIOUS RELATIONS UNDER ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES IN THE AGE OF NEW MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Inter-religious harmony is crucial in maintaining peaceful co-existence and national stability of a multiracial and multi-religious society. The existence of minor racial or religious tension in the society can escalate to a crisis and jeopardise inter-religious relations in this age of new media. The failure to preserve religious harmony may expose the society to conflict and chaos. Thus, this article aims to discuss and elaborate the fundamental elements in sustaining harmony among multi-religious society from Islamic perspective in the age of new media.

Methodology: This research employs the qualitative research design. The research method used is content analysis, and the library data that comprises the physical and online books and articles on topics related to religious harmony and new media, was collected from the years 2010 until 2021. Using deductive reasoning, the challenges of new media in the area were identified and solutions proposed.

Findings: The findings indicated that the challenges of interreligious harmony in the age of new media are the rapid spread of atheism, religious pluralism, misperception of a religion due to its intra-faith issues, mistaken identity of a religionist versus racist, misunderstanding of *'izzah* as arrogance and misrepresentation of Islam. These challenges can be reduced by applying the fundamental elements to

sustain interreligious harmony in Islamic perspective, namely *ta`āruf* (knowing each other), *tafāhum* (mutual understanding), *ta`āwun* (mutual cooperation), *takāful* (mutual protection), *tasāmuḥ* (mutual tolerant) and acceptance. Besides, Muslim educators or *murabbiyun* have to be the prosumers of the new media to continuously teach Islam, and instil *iman* and *adab* among fellow Muslims.

Contributions: This article contributes to the foundation of peaceful co-existence in a multi-religious context because the fundamental elements discussed form the basis of *fiqh al-ta'ayush* or the understanding of co-existence, especially in the age of new media.

Keywords: Basis of religious harmony, inter-religious relation in Islam, *fiqh al-ta'amul*, *fiqh al-ta'ayush,* religions in the age of new media.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Islam gives us the message of peace, love, brotherhood and harmony. This is mentioned in various verses of the Quran and Hadith, such as the hadith narrated by Abdullah bin 'Amr, the Prophet said, "A Muslim is the one who avoids harming Muslims with his tongue or his hands." (Bukhari, 6484). This hadith demonstrates how Islam strongly emphasizes on preserving harmonious interactions and prohibiting enmity among its believers.

Besides, Islam gives rights to others which also includes the rights of believing and practising one's religion. The history of the Prophet Muhammad's life, particularly during the Medinan period elucidated a very profound model on how peaceful co-existence was celebrated by rendering the rights to all in the community - Muslims and non-Muslims, in moral, economic, political, education as well as social aspects.

The question arises on how Islam maintains religious harmonious relations in the age of new media which brings along different challenges. This article explores this question by considering the fundamental elements of sustaining interreligious harmony and the peculiarity of new media.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This segment is divided into six subtitles which covers three main categories: Islamic perspective on human relation, some interreligious issues in Malaysia and the new media, with

the first category covered at length. The former encompassed the subtitles of unity and diversity of humankind, interaction in Islam, understanding co-existence and the concept of tolerance.

2.1 Unity and Diversity of Humankind

The purpose of diversity is mentioned in the Quran in few places. In 5:48, Allah mentioned that He made humanity to be diverse because He wanted to test them to see the most proactive and competitive among them in doing good. The diversity of Allah's creation is the impetus for humans to improve their quality of life in order to perform the good of the people, not the source of conflict and hostility.

In Quran 4:1, Allah mentioned that all people come from one God alone; regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religious beliefs, and they are descended from one pair of parents; Adam and Hawwa, and extended from one exalted soul; *nafs al-wahidah.* While peaceful co-existence and mutual respect are celebrated in Islam, it is emphasized that Muslims have to remain truthful to their identity and faith without compromising them as mentioned in the Quran 109: 1-6. In another verse (Quran 60:8), Allah reminded on treating with kindness and justice those who do not share the same faith as Muslims, despite the difference, notably if they have never been hostile to Muslims.

In maintaining a peaceful and harmonious living among multi-society, Islam has explained the importance of *adāb* and *akhlaq* in life repeatedly. Moreover, religion and morality in Islam are interrelated to the extent that one's character or moral behaviour presupposes faith and one's faith is affected by their action (Fathurrohman, 2021).

In 49:13, another purpose of human diversity is mentioned: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted". The other verse says: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is [rightly] guided" (Quran 16:125).

The first verse shows that Islam really encourage people to interact with each other by using the words '*lita`ārafū'* which means 'to know each other'. Ibn Kathīr (2001, p. 33) further explained in his exegesis that the verse stated above in Chapter 49 indicates that regardless of different tribes and nations, all humans are created equal as they are born from the same parents, Adam and Hawwa. The wisdom behind these differences in creation is because Allah would like them to know and understand each other. Furthermore, it is also a means for human to

accept, respect and embrace the differences that they have (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali & Mat Karim, 2005). Meanwhile, in the second verse, 16: 125, the word '*jādilhum*' is synonymous with what has been commonly discussed nowadays which is dialogue. *Jādilhum* or *al-jidāl* literally means arguments or debates in determining the truth. This term, which had been mentioned 29 times in the Qur'an, shows the importance of debates or dialogue as to discuss and clarify any religious or social issues (Sintang, 2012). The two terms that have been discussed above, not only elucidate the inclusiveness of Islam, but also indicate the importance of interaction among people to spread love, kindness and peaceful living among humankind (Sintang, 2012).

2.2 Interaction in Islam

The concept of interaction has been discussed by Islamic scholars through many approaches. Hassan al-Banna for example, had introduced three basic pillars of interaction especially in building a relationship in an *usrah,* literally means family (Al-Banna, 1979) or *halaqah,* literally means circle (`Alī Jābir, 1991). He stated that there are three pillars in interaction that build a strong bond relationship, which include *ta`āruf, tafāhum* and *takāful*. Also, there are other scholars who added *ta`āwun* as an additional step from these three pillars (Mahmud, 1993; Hamidah, 2015). These pillars of interaction not only help form a strong relationship among homogeneous society but also develop strong bonded heterogeneous society.

In forming a relationship or *ukhuwwah*, *ta`āruf* is important as the very first step in every interaction. It is the basic level for people to get to know each other. This step can lead them to the next level of interaction by allowing them to open their hearts to understanding or *tafāhum*. This is because through knowing one another, the sense of openness and acceptance in embracing the uniqueness of every individual is enhanced (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2018, 2020). *Tafāhum* as defined by Nur Ervannudin and Jiyanto (2016) connotes mutual understanding, and it is a step further to be close and comfortable with somebody. Reaching this state will not only let individuals to achieve good relation with others, but also let them avoid any misunderstanding and conflict. The stage of *tafahum* brings to another level known as *ta`āwun* or mutual support (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2020). Mutual support creates a stronger community and hinders them from hatred and oppression. Achievement of this level can finally result in achieving the highest level of interaction, which is *takāful*, or mutual guarantee. At this stage, people will no longer focus on themselves, instead the priority will be on others. The action of *takāful* was described in the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh): "Nu'man bin Bashir (May Allah be pleased with them) reported: Messenger of Allah SWT

said: 'The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever' (Bukhari, 6011). Hamidah (2015) explained that relationships that reach this stage of *takāful* are filled with the highest level of love and concern to one another despite having different religious belief; the burden of others will be shared and affect one another, as they will no longer have any self-interest.

Meanwhile, from the viewpoint of contemporary Islamic scholars, the concept of interaction is being discussed in detail with more comprehensive views in order to conform with the current situation. For example, the concepts of *fiqh al-ta`āmul* and *fiqh al-ta`āyush* have been introduced towards achieving good and peaceful relations among multicultural society that comprises different faiths and races.

The meaning of *ta`āmul* as discussed before is defined as mutual engagement or cooperation, and interaction that takes place between two persons or more. The concept of *fiqh al-ta`āmul* is commonly used among scholars to explain on the effort of unifying relationships between spouses in marriage, the society of different faiths and cultures, as well as in Islamic economy (*mu`āmalah*). Al-Fauzan (2007) stated that *fiqh al-ta`āmul* is a concept that emphasize on perfecting *adāb* and *akhlāk* or morality. He mentioned that in Islam, successful interaction does not only focus on interaction with Allah, but also with humans. Many people successfully perform their acts or worship, which involves the vertical relationship to Allah, yet still portray bad attitudes or *akhlāq* towards others. They still have the sense of hatred, being unjust, untrustworthy and other negativities (Al-Fauzan, 2007). Hence, *fiqh al-ta`āmul* becomes one of the means that encourages people to spread justice, peacefulness, love and mercy as a basic foundation in building good relation among multicultural society.

2.3 Understanding Co-existence

Fiqh al-ta`āyush* is also another concept that focuses on promoting unity. This concept has been discussed widely among Western and Islamic scholars, as it holds a comprehensive meaning. *Ta`āyush literally means going through a harmonious life despite having different faiths and races. Aini and Wan Ismail (2018) described that *ta`āyush* means living together as a community that is based on the spirit of love, high tolerance, acceptance of diversity, mutual understanding, trust and complementing each other. Besides that, the term *al-ta`āyush* is synonymous with the word co-existence. As explained by Kamaruzaman (2010) in her study on pluralistic co-existence, co-existence means each community has its own identity and uniqueness that comprise of different ethnic, race, religion and language. They live together as

a society or in the same country. She argued that the basis of producing a successful nation is through harmonious and happy co-existence (Kamaruzaman, 2010).

By reflecting on the role of Muslims as vicegerents of Allah, it is an obligation for Muslims to prioritize '*aqidah* above all as the basis of unity among humankind (Dusuki, 2021). *Khayra Ummah* as stated in the following verse shows that '*aqidah* is the root for spreading *da'wah*. A high conviction of faith influence people towards spreading virtues and avoiding vices as Allah stated in the Qur'an: "You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah. If only the People of the Scripture had believed, it would have been better for them. Among they are believers, but most of them are defiantly disobedient" (Quran, 3:110).

It is important to note that interaction is not only about building relationship, but it also involves the cognitive aspect. Having a holistic understanding of the foundation in every principle of interaction; *ta`āruf*, *tafāhum*, *takāful*, *ta`āwun*, *fiqh al-ta`āmul*, and *fiqh al-ta`āyush*, creates better attitude of *akhlaq Islamiyyah*. *Al-akhlaq al-Islamiyyah* is the essential factor for sustaining the well-being of the society especially among multi-ethnic and multi-religions society.

Hence, these are the elements that are regarded as the fundamental factors that contribute to the socio-religious harmony among multi-religious society. It is therefore not misleading to assume that a Muslim society that adorn themselves with such principles might be regarded as '*ummatan wasatan'* - the nation which is just and balanced. Allah said in the Qur'an: "And so We have made you believers an upright community (*ummatan wasatan*) so that you may be witnesses over humanity and that the Messenger may be a witness over you" (Quran, 2:143).

2.4 The Concept of Tolerance

Tolerance, according to Abdul Halim (2008), is equivalent to being positive and appreciating others by providing basic rights as human being. Two main models of tolerance are firstly, passive tolerance which means accepting differences as inevitable. Secondly is active tolerance, which means being engaged with others in the midst of differences and variance. Tolerance also means to be able to live side by side peacefully while appreciating the diversity that exists.

When tolerance is linked to religion and ethnic, these two concepts bring about a new concept. Religious tolerance according to the Golden Rule stipulates that we 'do not do unto others what we do not want them to do to us.' This principle requires that we put ourselves in the other's shoes and try to understand the situation once we are in another position. It is only

through this experience that we are able to understand the complexity and injustice faced by the other side. The spirit of being tolerant among multi-ethnic and multi-faith are inculcated by the practice of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) as they apply fair and humble treatment both in the relation with Muslim and non-Muslim (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali et al., 2017) to sustain the religious harmony and peaceful co-existence.

2.5 Religious Tensions in Malaysia

History has recorded cases on religious conflicts, such as the dispute on the use of the word Allah in Christian's publications, reclamation of the deceased, and insulting of religious figures. These tensions demonstrate that religious conflicts compromise the efforts in fostering inter-religious harmony. It is important for the government to manage every inter-religious conflict wisely to avoid it from becoming worse (Yussofe, 2016). As described by Sintang, Baharuddin, and Mohd Khambali @ Hambali (2012), the government faced a challenge to create inter-religious harmony and peaceful environment, as it is crucial in ensuring unity and solidarity among multi-religious adherents.

In Malaysian context, the government played an important role by enforcing various efforts and policies. There are a number of programmes, activities and policies that have been introduced by the government to ensure that the members of the society with different ethnic and religious backgrounds engage with each other actively (David, McLellan, Meng, Li, & Mei Tien, 2010). Preserving social harmony has become a national agenda for the government since the past decades. Among the governmental efforts to preserve a harmonious society are the implementation of *Rukun Negara* (National Principles), which has emphasized on the belief in God as one of the pillars of Malaysian social harmony. Besides *Rukun Negara*, the government also introduced *1 Malaysia* Concept to foster the unity of the nation (Tony Lim Abdullah et al., 2016).

2.6 New Media and Their Peculiarities

The age of globalization which has begun since the 18th century brought along with it a new perspective that has never been experienced by human civilization before. This new experience was embarked, prior to the emergence of the globalization age itself, by the invention of sophisticated technologies, notably the transportation, information and communication technologies. In this 21st century, the interest in experiencing how globalization changed our lives is not as much as the century when it first emerged. Many developments have taken place between the 18th to 21st centuries, which made the current experience rather exciting and

stimulating. This includes the invention of the Internet, rapid advancement in digital devices invention, such as the smartphones and tablets, and applications creation periodically. This leads to the age, known as the age of new media.

New media comprises the media and communication in digital forms which use computer technology. Because they use the Internet, access to breaking news and other information can be done instantly and from anywhere in the world, as long as there is appropriate device and connectivity. Elaborating on the characteristics of new media, Thompson (2018, para. 1) states that "new media are digital, interactive, hyper textual, globally networked, virtual and sometimes based on simulation." It implies, therefore, that unlike the early globalization stage when the 'old media' such as television, printed newspaper and magazines, and radios are used; the era of new media has its peculiarities which distinguish this era with that of the former, thus bringing the globalization era to another level.

The first peculiarity of the new media is that they allow the storage of different types of data (text, audio and visual) in one single system which is huge and robust. Transmission of information also occurs instantly through cables or the satellites. The second peculiarity is the interactivity of the new media in more than two-way interaction, where proactive consumers of the media are called 'prosumers' (Thompson, 2018) for setting up their own vlogs or sites and allow others to give feedback. The third peculiarity is the new media link users easily to other related sources and allow flexibility for them to navigate, choose and customize their own lifestyles. The fourth peculiarity is they speed up the intellectual development and enculturation process through effective and user-friendly global network. The fifth peculiarity is the new media allow virtual communication where users can either use their real identity or the fake ones when interacting to the virtual community. They are also free to choose to expose any angle of their lives and be secretive about the other, or to display certain images of themselves while hiding the other side of it. The last peculiarity which makes the new media even more exciting is the simulation characteristic, such as the one in role-playing video games, car driving or even medical surgery as used in some medical schools, makes the users feel the virtual experience like real experience.

The peculiarities of new media era can both be advantageous and challenging to religious harmony. They can be advantageous as tools to foster relationship with each other, teach and train conflict management and resolution, and counter unwanted acts that harm peaceful co-existence. On the other hand, there are few aspects that may need a close attention too.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study employed a content analysis method to analyse data. The verses of the Quran, books and articles, both physical and from online database were collected from the years 2010 until 2021. To identify the aspect of interreligious harmony, the analysis started by extracting points from the following keywords: 'humanity in Islam', 'religious harmony in Islam', 'relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims' and 'peaceful co-existence in Islam'. Then, in light of the relationship between the issue of interreligious harmony and new media, the search extended to the keyword 'new media' to understand its concepts and characteristics. The understanding of both areas, which are interreligious relation in Islam and the new media is further enhanced by deductive reasoning to demonstrate the challenges of interreligious relationship brought by the new media and contemplate on ways to overcome them.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 The Fundamental Elements in Sustaining Religious Harmony

Looking at the situation of the many heterogeneous societies today, there are unresolved issues - misunderstandings, oppressions and discriminations. Mohd Khambali @ Hambali (2018) argues that different ethnicities, skin colours, faiths, cultures, and thoughts have given a huge challenge in creating harmonious lives. To face this challenge, the cultivation of religious values and improvement of morality are much needed in the society. Hence, the implementation of the concepts of interaction according to Islamic perspectives as highlighted in the foregoing discussion is practical in fostering good characters.

The idealism of the levels of interaction (*ta`āruf*, *tafāhum*, *ta`āwun* and *takāful*) for example, influences the society to become more knowledgeable and understanding of other cultures and religious traditions. Instead of being ignorant of each other, the process of *ta`āruf* is a good start in creating awareness in the society, which then leads to *tafāhum* and *ta`āwun*. It may help inculcate the sense of respect and openness towards others. Besides, this process also may produce a supportive nation or can be described as the stage of *takāful*. Hence, these fundamental elements may help sustain the religious harmony among multi-societies as follows:

a. *Ta`āruf* (knowing each other)

Ta`āruf* or defined as knowing each other is an important basis in every process of interaction. It is the basic process which leads to the next step in the interaction. *Ta`āruf is not just recognizing the name and the face, but it is even deeper (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2004).

Encouragement to *ta`āruf* is clearly mentioned in Quran 49: 13 as stated previously. The verse explains that every human being, regardless of race and descent, is all created from the same lineage, namely Adam and Hawwa. Therefore, there is no difference between human beings in the sight of God except on the religious basis and one's obedience to God. Thus, the diversity that God created from the perspective of race and ethnicity is meant for them to know each other and build relationship with each other. It is undeniable that the diversity of cultures, races and understandings presents challenges in achieving agreement and unity in the society (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2018). However, religious values can create a harmonious interaction between races.

The bond of friendship and brotherhood is important to achieve the unity of humanity. This bond requires one to know the socio-cultural background, politics, economy, education and ethnicity of the other more extensively (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2004).

Gradually, the bond of friendship between individuals, followed by the bond between communities, between states and even between countries as a result of this process of acquaintance is a point of departure towards producing an attitude of mutual respect, mutual trust, and love (*mahabbah*). It also leads to the attitude of mutual respect and fellowship despite linguistic and socio-cultural barriers. The strong bond further catalyses the formation of a united society that lives in harmony which further fastens human brotherhood. The process of *ta`āruf* implemented is able to open one's heart to the next level, which is *tafāhum*.

b. *Tafāhum* (mutual understanding)

Knowing one another or *ta`āruf* leads people to an attitude of openness and acceptance in understanding the uniqueness of each individual (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2004). On the other hand, *tafāhum* is defined as understanding each other. It is an advanced stage from just knowing, that is to understand how to approach a person (Nur Ervannudin & Jiyanto, 2016). *Tafāhum* also carries the meaning of deep understanding so as to create a sense of comfort in association and easy to approach. Relationships on this level can avoid disputes and fights (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2018). This will make it easier for them to help each other or known as *ta`āwun*.

There are so many common grounds in terms of cultural practices and values that can be capitalised to promote reciprocity and understanding; so that all cultures, such as Malays, Indian, and Chinese may live together in harmony. Racial distrust that still persist among various ethnic groups cannot be used as an excuse or a hindrance that prevents people of

different ethnic groups from living in peace and harmony. This is because there are many common aspects of culture, life, and good values among different ethnicities.

Religious infrastructures of mosque and churches which are built alongside each other have promoted peace message and utilised religious networks to strengthen brotherhood within the community of different religions. The model of building religious places of worship at the neighbourhood in many parts of district in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, for example, has fostered social cohesion through demonstrating tolerance, practical mercy and caring for the others (Tan, 2020).

c. *Ta`āwun* (mutual help and co-operation), and *takāful* (mutual protection)

Ta`āwun* means to help in carrying out good and abandoning evil. As a result of this attitude, the weak will become strong and the strong will become stronger. This process of *ta`āwun will eventually lead individuals to another level of interaction called *takāful*, which is to bear each other's burdens without bothering about one's own interests.

The attitude of *takāful* is demonstrated in one of the narrations by one of the servants of Ibn Abbas: "One day we slaughtered a sheep at home. Ibn Abbas told me to leave a share for our neighbor who happened to be a Jew. He repeated his statement several times until I asked him why he was so much concerned about that Jewish neighbour. He replied: The Prophet of Islam advised us so much about our neighbors that I'm afraid he may have a share in my inheritance" (Muslim, 6586).

Takāful is the highest level of brotherhood because at this stage, there is a feeling of mutual love. In fact, the pain and sadness of others is also felt to the point of caring for his brother first rather than taking care of self-interest (Hamidah, 2015).

d. *Tasāmuḥ* (tolerance) and Acceptance

Mohd Khambali @ Hambali (2008) stresses that Islam highly values *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance) and acceptance as the strengths of Islam. In Quran 60:8, it is stated that justice and goodwill towards others who are of different convictions is one of the main conditions that brought about tolerance. *Tasāmuḥ* and acceptance are closely related to the concept of *mahabbah* (love) that requires every individual to be broad-hearted, rational and professional in a certain matter. Nevertheless, *mahabbah* has the meaning and approach that is more ideal than tolerance, as tolerance often raises confusion among the society when the question arises as to who should 'give' and who should 'take'. Hence, recently, some articles of the Malaysian Federal Constitution have been contested. Moreover, *tasāmuḥ* and acceptance are much-needed

universal values in building unity in diversity. When the practice of *tasāmuḥ* and acceptance becomes a culture in the daily interaction between people of different religions, it is able to produce a society with positive attitude, broad hearted and compassionate. However, Islam only allows for *tasāmuḥ* and acceptance in the aspects that do not violate the main tenets of its teachings. *Tasāmuḥ* and acceptance in Islam are within the sphere that clarifies the fact of individual's independence so that his life is civil and ethical.

4.2 Challenges of New Media to Interreligious Harmony

The first challenge that one can anticipate with the new media era is the rise of atheism and agnosticism which has started in foreign countries and currently has infected our Muslim youth through the global and quick connectivity of social media. It is reported that there is (are) closed atheist group(s) in a social network where youth, including the Muslims, can confess their feelings and share their thoughts freely. According to a study on 30 European countries by Berkers and Siebens (2020), atheists are more autonomic rather than obedient and the factors that lead to the preference of autonomy over obedience are educational attainment and expressive individualism. These qualities match the qualities of many young new media consumers these days. Although the National Principle entails the belief in God and the federal constitutions emphasized the importance of religion in peace nation building, there are voices of atheistic normalisation in these countries. Atheism is considered a challenge to religious harmony because with it, there is no belief in God, which is the core reference of religious values and interreligious harmony.

The second challenge for religious harmony in this new media age is religious pluralism. It is an ideology in which not only universal values across religions are appreciated, but the authenticity and supremacy of Islam is being reduced to the similar level as other religions. This is unlike the understanding of the verse stated by Allah in the Qur'an: "Certainly, Allah's only Way is Islam. Those who were given the Scripture did not dispute among themselves out of mutual envy until knowledge came to them. Whoever denies Allah's signs, then surely Allah is swift in reckoning" (Quran 3:19). Revelation (the Qur'an and the Sunnah) has always been the top in the list of epistemological consideration for Muslims, above human logical thinking. It is considered as the primary source of knowledge. In fact, authentic revelation necessitates a harmonious relationship with sound reasoning. The clash between the two signifies that there is some defect whether in the authenticity of the revelation or in the process of reasoning. In this case, religious pluralism is in fact the distortion of inter-religious pluralistic co-existence, which has the dimension of peaceful engagement between religionists in the name of common

well-being, and for Muslims, *da'wah*. The former, on the other hand, discourages heterogeneous community by imposing standardized secular liberal values on everyone. The imposition seems so ironic to the core idea of liberalism which calls for freedom. Instead, if the Muslim community understandS the teachings of Islam in depth and by heart, they will be able to be the effective peacemakers in the community.

The third challenge for religious harmony in this new media age is to ensure that all the principles of religious harmony that we discussed earlier (*ta'aruf, tafahum, takaful, ta'awun, ta'ayush, ta'amul*) can be upheld by Muslims community first. This is mostly difficult in intra-faith relationship and dialogue. With the instant posts, responses and comments on face book, Instagram and twitter, all levels of religious community are free to speak up their mind. Some of them are still learning and not able to apply good ethics while embarking on the social media. In such condition, different denominations, or political groups that are opposed to one's stance could be ridiculed. This, in a way, portrays a bad image to certain religion. This is an intra-religious issue which somehow affect the interreligious relation if it is not tackled well. The negative image portrayal of the religionists could be misinterpreted as the teaching of a particular religion, albeit it is not the case.

The hate speech and racism provoked by a believer on social media can sometimes disguise the demarcation between the concepts of religion and race. A Malay which urges for Malay supremacy, for instance, could be mistakenly seen as a Muslim who pushes the agenda forward. This is even more so if the Malay in the scenario uses the Malay supremacy as an excuse to safeguard Islam as his or her religious identity. In this case, Islam is seen by the non-Muslims as a racist religion, notwithstanding its prohibition against racism. This is the fourth challenge that may be faced in instilling religious harmony.

The fifth challenge is related to misunderstanding of what being a Muslim means. On the one hand, a Muslim must be proud and grateful to be a Muslim. This concept of pride and feeling of worth for being a Muslim is called *'izzah*. On the other hand, this kind of pride is not arrogance towards non-Muslims. If a Muslim understands *'izzah* as arrogance, then the outcome of this comprehension is his or her external actions that are hostile, rebellious, disrespectful and antagonistic towards non-Muslims. In contrast, Islam is about mercy, compassionate, affectionate, courteous and considerate towards all creatures, let alone human beings. Being a Muslim means to conduct oneself as the Prophet showed us and Allah described: "We have sent you O Prophet only as a mercy for the whole world." (Quran 21:107). In another Chapter it is mentioned: "Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah you have an excellent

example for whoever has hope in Allah and the Last Day, and remembers Allah often" (Quran 33:21).

Finally, another challenge of religious harmony, a challenge which is perhaps the most trying of all for Muslims and adherents of any religions, is the misrepresentation of Islam, and religions in general, in the media. In journalism, there is a powerful technique for 'construction of social reality' (Lippman, 1922; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tuchman, 1978), which is called 'framing' (Hallahan, 1999). According to Hallahan (1999), framing is conceptually connected to the underlying psychological processes that people use to examine information, to make judgments, and to draw inferences about the world around them. In simpler words, framing creates how journalists want the users to perceive the world and the others. The effect of framing in the age of new media is much worse if we consider the speed that one news can travel to the other side of the world, and if the journalists choose to focus on the ugly side of the story, while negating the whole truth. Exaggeration in reporting, over-generalization of the objects or circumstances that surround them, and stereotyping of an inter-group could be further inflamed by the public, thus animosity towards the others could be intensified. Having said that, it is also the smart devices owned by common public, and the feasibility of new media that can enable the 'de-framing' process if they are used to capture the other side of the story to offer the full story to other users.

4.3 Suggestions to Overcome Challenges of New Media in Fostering Interreligious Harmony

First and foremost, with regards to the first and second challenges of atheism and agnosticism, and religious pluralism, these challenges are threatening to the existence survival and identity of all religions, not only Islam, let alone interreligious relation. On the other hand, the third until the fifth challenges are all resulting from intra-religious roots, whereas the last challenge could result from both – external or internal to the Muslim and other religious society at large.

Each of the elements has to be considered for the sake of religious sustainability. Both of the first two challenges require a special custom-made approach and a certain degree of the six elements. For instance, the atheists among youth have to be known (*ta'āruf*) and understood (*tafāhum*) regarding the background of their stories. Each individual involved must have different explanation which leads to the ideology that they embrace. Perhaps in the cases of atheists and agnostics, and religious pluralists, older and wiser individuals who are trained in religious knowledge and have the skill to listen are better at engaging with these two groups. In the areas where humanity is concerned, mutual protection (*takāful*) and mutual cooperation

(*ta'āwun*) can definitely be applied in agreeable projects. This is to allow mutual co-existence (*ta'āyush*) and foster love (*mahabbah*) among the members of homo-sapiens.

On another note, the concept of *tasāmuh* (mutual tolerance) has to be defined more concretely as to whether tolerating the infiltration of atheistic, agnostics and religious pluralists' ideas into religious believers is what is needed, or tolerating the peaceful co-existence of these groups. It seems that the latter is more fitting to the context of religious sustainability, let alone interreligious dialogue.

It goes without saying that application of the six fundamental elements in curbing the challenges that stem from intra-religious issues is more straightforward and easy. All the elements will have to be applied every now and then to improve Islamic qualities of religious believers in order to improve and maintain good relationship with other religions.

4.4 Prospects of Religious Harmony in the Era of New Media

Albeit the challenges of religious harmony highlighted previously, there is still hope for a better peaceful co-existence. The new media is a double-edged sword which can defeat or benefit the mission.

Internally, with the use of the new media, there is a need for Muslims to educate themselves and their fellow Muslims about Islam comprehensively. The values of *iman* (faith) need to be instilled in the souls of the young ones and solidified. This cannot be done through force and hate, but through a gentle personal touch and of course, heartfelt prayers with the hope to fill their souls with the beauty of faith to Allah, and stimulate their senses and limbs to perform virtuous acts that are loved by Allah.

Additionally, Islamic values on the responsibility of *da'wah* and peaceful co-existence need to be enhanced more pro-actively in the new media. In other words, Muslim educators or *murabbiyun*, notably, have to become prosumers, not only consumers of the new media. More Muslim *du'at* with a clear worldview or *tasawwur* of Islam have to be encouraged to be involved in ethical journalism, virtual reality and simulator contents developer to produce more competitive Muslim youth who know their priority as servants and caliph of Allah on earth.

To curb the intra-faith conflicts and portrayal of the ugly image of Muslims' interpersonal relations on the media, the process of *ta'dib* needs to be ongoing creatively. The values of mutual respect, compassion, affection and consideration need to be restored and turn into habits. Misunderstanding of how Muslims deal with different views need to be addressed and corrected. Proper ways of handling diversity need to be taught and revisited from time to time. Although the roles of *murabbiyun* are becoming more demanding these days, and if

employing the new media is the only effective way to counter all the problems that they cause among Muslims today, there is a dire need for *murabbiyun* to always learn, unlearn and relearn.

It is these kinds of preparation that the Muslims need to face the people of different faiths and ideologies. These kinds of preparation ensure that the Muslims' identity are maintained in a pluralistic society, while being pro-actively engaged with the other faiths. The pro-active engagement with other faiths is crucial not only to ensure that the world is a prosperous and harmonious place to live in, but also to eradicate misunderstanding about the distorted images of Muslims as portrayed by the media. It is hoped that through such active engagement, Islam as a comprehensive way of life is offered to the others.

Externally, considering the prospect of interreligious harmony with the use of new media, there are many activities that can be done to promote interreligious dialogue. In the study on Internet and Religion, Campbell (2006, p. 235) elaborates based on the third wave of internet and religion studies that "studies of religion online add unique insights and help contribute to the overall understanding of life in a global information society". This is evident when the use of new media becomes more prominent during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic which forced for lockdown in almost all places in the world. The lockdown leads to more interreligious dialogues being held online which sometimes involved religious leaders from abroad. Additionally, virtual reality aids spiritual experience to a certain extent (Hornbeck & Barret, 2008). Recently, visits to places of worships are done through the means of virtual reality, and this is one of the advantages of the new media in fostering interreligious understanding.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The fundamental elements to sustain religious harmony as discussed in this article are *ta'aruf* (knowing of each other), *tafahum* (mutual understanding), *ta`āwun* (mutual help and co-operation) and *takāful* (mutual protection), and *tasamuh* and acceptance. On the other hand, the contemporary age of the new media has challenged the efforts to attain religious harmony in many aspects including the preservation of Muslim or any other religious faith, identity and worldviews, and the image religion as depicted on the media either through their misbehaviours or distorted by some irresponsible journalists amidst the diverse religious community. Despite those challenges, the fundamental elements could be applied in dealing with the challenges of new media that stem from outside and inside the Muslim believers' community. The advantages of the new media to provide unique insights in the study of religions and promote spirituality through its virtual reality should be embraced to foster more sustainable religious

understanding and harmony. The study has implications on the Muslims to recall the basis of interreligious harmony in Islam, on the non-Muslims to get to know the Islamic principles with regard to brotherhood in humanity despite diversity among human beings, and on interreligious relations with the advent of new media age. This article contributes to the foundation of peaceful co-existence in a multi-religious context because the fundamental elements discussed form the basis of *fiqh al-ta'ayush* or the understanding of co-existence, especially in the age of new media. Further empirical studies on the effects of new media on interreligious harmony in the Malaysian context, either based on individual state or case-by-case, should be conducted.

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