EXPERIENCES, ATTITUDES, AND PROSPECTS OF MALAYSIAN MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN STUDENTS ON DIALOGUE

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EXPERIENCES, ATTITUDES, AND PROSPECTS OF MALYSIAN MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN STUDENTS ON DIALOGUE

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EXPERIENCES, ATTITUDES, AND PROSPECTS OF MALAYSIAN MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN STUDENTS ON DIALOGUE

ABSTRACT

What are prospects for Muslim-Christian dialogue among those who are likely to be in positions of influence in the future? This is the question behind the original research on which this dissertation is based. Postgraduate Muslim and Christian students of various universities and seminaries in Malaysia were interviewed about their experiences with people of the other faith, the benefits, need and difficulties in regard to dialogue and their personal interest in it. Analysis took place by basic statistical methods, content analysis and comparative analysis. Results show that there are obstacles that have a detrimental effect on dialogue. Among them are that students have limited contact with those of the other faith, Muslims do not want to be accused of taking steps towards compromising their faith and Christian students are concerned that their contact with Muslims could be interpreted in a way of propagating their faith to Muslims. Nevertheless, the students are not interested in living segregated lives. Openness on both sides for various modes of dialogue is high – higher than they would think it is. This dissertation concludes that the students find open doors for dialogue among those of the other faith and that they as prospective future leaders of their religious communities have many opportunities to move dialogue forward if they desire to do so. By laying open the attitudes, hopes, interests and concerns the findings of this study can be used to find ways how dialogue can be conducted successfully. In the Conclusion some steps toward implementation are suggested. The findings have significance for the students themselves, the religious communities they are part of and for all those who are interested in Muslim-Christian dialogue in Malaysia.

Keywords: Muslim-Christian dialogue, interreligious dialogue, Religion in Malaysia, research among students, Muslim and Christian students.

PENGALAMAN, SIKAP DAN PROSPEK PELAJAR MUSLIM DAN KRISTIAN MALAYSIA TERHADAP DIALOG

ABSTRAK

Apakah prospek dialog Muslim-Kristian dalam kalangan mereka yang berpotensi berada dalam kedudukan yang berpengaruh pada masa hadapan? Inilah persoalan di sebalik kajian asal yang menjadi asas disertasi ini. Pelajar pascasiswazah beragama Islam dan Kristian dari pelbagai universiti dan maktab (sekolah latihan untuk melatih bakal paderi) di Malaysia telah ditemu bual tentang pengalaman mereka dengan orang berlainan agama yang merangkumi kelebihan, keperluan dan kesukaran ketika berdialog dan minat peribadi mereka terhadap aktiviti ini. Analisis kajian dilakukan dengan menggunakan kaedah statistik asas, analisis kandungan dan analisis perbandingan. Dapatan kajian mendapati terdapat halangan yang memberi kesan buruk terhadap dialog. Antaranya ialah pelajar mempunyai hubungan yang renggang dengan penganut agama lain. Sebagai contoh, orang Islam tidak mahu dituduh melakukan sesuatu yang akan menjejaskan akidah mereka dan pelajar Kristian bimbang akan hubungan mereka dengan orang Islam boleh disalah tafsir yang mereka sedang menyebarkan agama mereka kepada orang Islam. Walau bagaimanapun, pelajar-pelajar ini tidak gemar akan kehidupan yang terasing. Keterbukaan kedua-dua pihak untuk berdialog dalam pelbagai bentuk adalah tinggi – lebih tinggi daripada yang mereka sangkakan. Dapatan kajian mendapati pelajar sentiasa mencari ruang untuk berdialog dengan mereka yang berbeza agama memandangkan mereka adalah bakal pemimpin komuniti agama pada masa depan. Oleh itu, mereka mempunyai banyak peluang untuk mengetengahkan dialog seperti ini jika mereka ingin berbuat demikian. Penelitian terhadap minat, harapan, dan sikap ambil berat dalam dapatan kajian ini boleh digunakan untuk mengenal pasti dan menjelaskan bagaimana dialog dapat dijalankan dengan jayanya. Pengkaji turut mencadangkan beberapa langkah ke arah pelaksanaan

dialog ini pada bahagian kesimpulan. Dapatan kajian ini adalah penting bagi pelajar itu sendiri, komuniti agama yang mereka sertai dan untuk mana-mana pihak yang berminat dalam dialog Muslim-Kristian di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Dialog Muslim-Kristian, Dialog antara agama, Agama di Malaysia, Penyelidikan dalam kalangan pelajar, pelajar Islam dan Kristian.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is my pleasure to thank those who contributed to the completion of this dissertation. I have been a bit of a peculiarity among the students at UM's Academy of Islamic Studies. There have not been too many students around who come from Germany, are Christians and come with a completed PhD in Intercultural Studies but with no background in Islamic Studies.

My thanks are directed towards the leadership of the Academy of Islamic Studies and the Department of Aqidah and Islamic Thought for making it possible for me to study there and for the exemplary kindness with which they treated me. I also thank Dr. Alwani Binti Ghazali and Associate Professor Dr. Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali for the guidance they provided throughout my studies and for the patience displayed when the completion of the dissertation took longer than anticipated. Without the openness of Muslim and Christian students to share their experiences, thoughts and attitudes, this research would not have been possible and I look back to the interviews with deep appreciation for everyone who participated.

It is my wish that the study contributes to moving dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Malaysia forward. May the hindrances that undoubtedly exist not asphyxiate the wish for better understanding, greater collaboration and deeper relationships expressed so clearly by these students, especially as they prepare for roles of leadership in their religious communities.

In a time where polemics generates applause, there is a need for people to listen to each other with at least a minimum level of goodwill, the desire to understand and the commitment to build bridges wherever possible. My constant plea during my time in Malaysia was for those who followed other beliefs than my own to explain their beliefs as best as they could to me so that I would have a chance to represent it adequately among those in my own faith community. This is what I have committed myself to do.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation investigates the experiences, attitudes and interest of Muslim and Christian postgraduate students of their own religion in dialogue with adherents of the other religion. Its aim is to evaluate the prospects for dialogue engagement of these students, which necessitates taking into account societal factors that impact dialogue as described by the students.

Research was conducted from September 2019 to April 2020 as part of a Master in Islamic Studies program at the University of Malaya's Academy of Islamic Studies under the guidance of Dr. Alwani Binti Ghazali and Associate Professor Dr. Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali.

This first chapter locates the research project in the wider context and describes the contribution it makes in the field of studies about Muslim-Christian dialogue. An overview of the dissertation will be provided at the end of Chapter 1.

1.1 Background

In a global perspective, Christianity and Islam are the religions with the most adherents. According to the latest reliable figures of 2020, 32.2% of the global population has been Christian and 24.2% Muslim.[1] This means that the two religions together represent well over half of the global population. According to a projection for 2050, the shares of Christianity grow slightly to 34.3% while Islam will rise to 29.5% which means that almost 64% of the global population will be either Christian or Muslim.[2] There can be no doubt that how the two religions and their adherents relate to

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[1] Gina A. Zurlo, *World Religion Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2024).
[2] Ibid.

each other, is and will continue to be of utmost importance for peace, order and stability in this world.[3]

These global figures play out very differently in different countries. Apart from countries where neither Christianity nor Islam is dominant, there are many countries that have a clear Christian majority population and others with a clear Muslim majority population. Only few countries have an almost even distribution of both religions. In many of the countries that are clearly dominated by a population of a certain religion, laws, the society as whole and customs are also influenced by this respective religion; even if a state may be officially neutral towards religions or define itself as secular. Religions, the traditions and the moral values that come with it have a high impact on the life of many people and often also on the way a nation is set up.

According to the last census, Malaysia's population is 63.5% Muslim, 18.7% Buddhist, 9.1% Christian, and 6.1% Hindu.[4] The vast majority of the total population as well as the majority in each province is Muslim, with the only exception of Sarawak, where there are more Christians than Muslims.

Islam has a long tradition in Southeast Asia and first spread via the common trade routes and later through Sufi missionaries. According to Hussin Mutalib, the exact beginnings of the spread of Islam in what today constitutes Peninsula Malaysia are debated, but many scholars date it to the 12th century. The "Terengganu Stone", the first archaeological evidence of Islam in Malaysia, is dated by Syed al-Attas to the year 1303,[5] but it is likely that Islam started to make its way into the Northern part of the Malayan Peninsula even earlier. Malacca became the first centre for Muslim activity in 1414 with the conversion of King Parameswara.[6]

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[3] See: Paul Hedges, "The Contemporary Context of Muslim–Christian Dialogue," in *Contemporary Muslim-Christian Encounters: Developments, Diversity and Dialogues*, ed. Paul Hedges (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 30-31.

[4] With the remaining 2.7% accounting for other or no religious affiliation or the religious affiliation unknown (in total more than 100% because of rounding); see Malaysia Department of Statistics, "Popoulation and Housing Census of Malaysia 2020," https://www.dosm.gov.my. The figures were published in 2022.

[5] Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Correct Date of the Trengganu Inscription: Friday, 4th Rajab, 702 A.H./Friday, 22nd February, 1303 A.C.* (Kuala Lumpur, MY: Muzium Negara, 1970).

[6] He changed his name to Megat Iskandar Shah; see Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, Southeast Asia Background Series (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 6.

With the coming of the Portuguese in 1511, Christianity entered Malaysia in its Roman-Catholic form. After the Dutch conquest in 1641, Christianity in its Protestant form started to spread.[7] During the British rule (1824-1957), Islam was "bureaucratized" as Mutalib[8] calls it. He states that although Islam was not curtailed, the British regulated Islamic institutions and controlled the implementation of Islamic law.

When Malaysia was moving towards independence in 1957, the place and role of Islam and that of other religions in the nation had to be defined. The result of the discussions is found in Article 3 (1) of the Federal Constitution which states: "Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation."[9] The special and elevated position of Islam in Malaysia is evident: state sultans are constitutional heads of Islam, and the King (Yang di-Pertuan Agong) is responsible to safeguard Islam nationwide.[10] Furthermore, Article 160 (2) of the Federal Constitution stipulates that Malays are Muslims, must adhere to Malay customs and culture and use the Malay language. This intertwining of ethnicity and religion has had a profound effect on Malaysian society and the status and relations of different religions.

According to Article 11 (4), state and federal laws may "control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam." These laws exist and, as will be demonstrated, have an impact on interreligious relations and dialogue.[11] Although not all Muslims in Malaysia are Malay, all Malays are Muslim. Therefore, these laws have a special impact on the Malay community, acting as a kind of fence that keeps the Malay community together under one religion.

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[7] John Roxborogh, "A Bibliography of Christianity in Malaysia (1990, 1997, 2002)," http://roxborogh.com/malaysia/default.htm.

[8] Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, 25.

[9] "Federal Constitution of Malaysia," http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/FC/Federal%20Consti%20(BI%20text).pdf.

[10] See Articles 38 and 71 in the Federal Constitution in conjunction with the respective state constitutions and state enactments.

[11] For a fuller treatment of the issue and the consequences for dialogue, see Chapter 5, Thesis 11.

Despite Islam's constitutional prominence, Muslims coexist with followers of other religions. Consequently, adherents of the different religions need to find ways to live with each other as citizens of one country and members of one society.

Starting from the late 1970s, Islam experienced a "revival" in Malaysia.[12] During the first term of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's prime ministership (1981-2003), his administration gave a boost to the Islamisation of Malaysian government policies and the society.[13] The measures included compulsory religious instruction at schools, aligning the legal system with Islamic principles, establishing Islamic banks and institutions, and forming the Islamic Missionary Foundation (*Yayasan Dakwah*).[14] The Islamization of society does not necessarily drive Muslims and other people further apart,[15] but it can contribute to it.[16] At the end of 2018, in the first year of his new term in office, Mahathir admitted that "national schools have become religious schools" and if, as it is the case, the schools teach four periods Islam per day, "[t]he Chinese and the Indians won't go to the national schools."[17]

Despite the Constitution's emphasis on the practice of different religions "in peace and harmony", there have occasionally been tensions between those who argue for a strong influence of Islam in society and Christians. Walters mentions a number of concerns from a Christian perspective, ranging from discrimination in land allotment for

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[12] *Islam in Southeast Asia*, 21.

[13] See: *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State?* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1993), 29-33.

[14] Cf. *Islam in Southeast Asia*, 27.

[15] Many Muslims would state rather the opposite: Where society is structured after Islam, its rules and values, God's purposes for humankind can best be fulfilled; Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, for example writes that only "Islām emulates the pattern or form according to which God governs His Kingdom." *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur, MY: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1993).

[16] This is exactly how many Christians and other religious minorities perceived it; see Chong Eu Choong, "The Christian Response to State-Led Islamization in Malaysia," in *Religious Diversity in Muslim-Majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*, ed. Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 295-96. For more sources concerning the drifting apart of different groups in society, see section 2.3.1.3 in the Literature Review.

[17] "Malays Must Change Their Value System to Succeed - Mahathir," Bermana.com (29. December 2018), http://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=1679663.

non-Muslim communities over the Islamization of the curriculum at universities to the torching of church buildings at the beginning of the 21st century.[18]

A famous controversy is the prohibition for Christians to use the word "Allah" when referring to God, at least in publications.[19] The prohibition was first issued in 1986,[20] but the controversy is still ongoing[21] and in a latest decision the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the use of "Allah" by Christians.[22]

Another area of tensions is the issue of conversion, which, for Muslims, is equivalent with apostasy. For a Malay Muslim to change his or her religion entails, if at all possible, major difficulties,[23] as the case of Lina Joy illustrates which was widely discussed in the media.[24] Issues like the prohibition of propagation of other faiths in Malaysia are often seen by Muslims as justified on a number of reasons[25] and by Christians as limiting the personal rights and freedom of the individual.[26] Such tensions

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[18] Albert Sundararaj Walters, "Issues in Christian–Muslim Relations: A Malaysian Christian Perspective," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 18, no. 1 (2007).

[19] See Jaclyn L. Neo, "What's in a Name? Malaysia's "Allah" Controversy and the Judicial Intertwining of Islam with Ethnic Identity," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 12, no. 3 (2014).

[20] The prohibition was issued in a circular letter to Christian publishers by the Publication control division of the *Kementerian Dalam Negeri*. (Letter KDN : S.59/3/9/A Klt. 2, dated 5 December 1986). The letter itself could not be accessed; it is referred to frequently in documents that discuss the controversy around the use of the word "Allah" by Christians; see for example: Bob Teoh, Allah: More Than Just a Word, (2010), http://www.mysinchew.com/download/AllahBook.pdf.

[21] See Ida Lim, "Court Decision in Bumiputera Christian's 'Allah' Case Deferred to Allow Engagement," malaymail (12. August 2018), https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/08/12/court-decision-in-bumiputera-christians-allah-case-deferred-to-allow-engage/1661742. The cases that caused controversy varied from the publication of Sunday School material over the distribution of Bibles to CDs with biblical material that were confiscated, but it the underlying issue is always the use of the word "Allah" for God by Christians.

[22] "Malaysia High Court Rules Christians Can Use 'Allah'," BBC News (11. March 2021), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56356212.

[23] See Walters, "Issues in Christian–Muslim Relations", 76-78; Ahmad Masum and Nehaluddin Ahmad, "Freedom of Religion and Apostasy under International Law: With Special Reference to Article 11 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution," *Journal of East Asia & International Law* 6, no. 2 (2013).

[24] See, for example, Jalil Hamid and Syed Azman, "Malaysia's Lina Joy Loses Islam Conversion Case," Reuters (30. May 2007), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-religion-ruling/malaysias-lina-joy-loses-islam-conversion-case-idUSSP20856820070530.

[25] See Zuliza Mohd Kusrin et al., "Legal Provisions and Restrictions on the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religions among Muslims in Malaysia," *Kajian Malaysia* 321, no. 2 (2013).

[26] See Hwa Yung, "Malaysia," in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson, Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 221-23.

exist – they are acknowledged and seen as an impediment to dialogue even by Muslim scholars.[27]

On the other hand, when Christians act in a manner that may result in disharmony or even the transgression of the prohibition against proselytizing among Muslims, such actions can similarly be perceived as a hindrance to the fostering of more amicable relations and the enhancement of dialogue. One can think of the case where Bibles were distributed in front of a secondary school in Penang; allegedly also to Muslim students.[28]

While Christians may feel constrained in their freedom by movements for greater Islamisation of society and Muslims might be disgruntled by Christians who are ignoring the space assigned for other religions than Islam in Malaysia, it is equally true that Malaysia has long been known as a country where adherents of different religions live in peace and harmony with each other. Abd Hakim Mohad et al. have shown that Christians in Sabah still have good relations with their Muslim neighbours and that the controversy concerning the use of the word "Allah" for God has not damaged these relationships.[29] On an institutional level, there are initiatives like the forum on "Islam and Multiculturalism – The need for educational reform," conducted by the International Institute of Islamic Civilisation and Malay World (ISTAC), where the need for a pluralistic society was emphasized by the speakers Anwar Ibrahim and John Esposito.[30] During Ramadan 2019, the Muslim organization "Global Unity Network" and the Christian organization "Christians for Peace and Harmony in Malaysia" (CPHM) jointly invited clerics and other leaders of both sides to a corporate dinner in

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[27] Arfah Ab Majid, "Inter-Religious Dialogue: A Threat to Aqidah or Platfform [sic.] of Da'wah?," http://www.ukm.my/rsde/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/21-inter-religious.pdf.

[28] See Opalyn Mok, "Authorities Probe Bible Distribution near School," Malay Mail (7. November 2018), https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/11/07/authorities-probe-bible-distribution-near-school/1691022.

[29] See Abd Hakim Mohad, et al., "Understanding the Christian Community's Stance Towards the Muslim Community in Sabah: After the Ban on the Usage of the Term *Allah*," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7, no. 8 (2017), 459.

[30] Terence Netto, "Anwar's Tepid Endorsement of Pluralism," malaysiakini (07 February 2019), https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/463056.

order to build bridges between the two faith communities.[31] Both sides expressed the wish to live in good and uncomplicated relationships with each other; more in the way as it was back in the 1970s. They also agreed that the steps of moving closer together must be taken with caution because trust needs to be built up.[32] In 2017 a dialogue took place with the topic "Deceitful? Distracting? Or Dedicated? Evangelicals & Current Controversies", which was organized by the Christian Kairos Dialogue Network (KDN) and the STM Centre for Religion and Society and attended by representatives from IKRAM (Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia), ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), and the CFM (Christian Federation of Malaysia).[33] After a presentation by the Methodist Bishop Emeritus Dr. Hwa Yung, the then Assistant Professor at the International Islamic University Malaysia, Dr. Mazlee Malik, responded, followed by a Q&A session. Recent controversies that had arisen were discussed, and many misunderstandings were clarified. As a last example, and moving to a global level, it is significant that a number of Malaysian Muslim leaders were signatories to the "A Common Word" initiative[34] one of the biggest and most significant interfaith initiatives in recent decades.[35]

On one side, the distance between Muslims and Christians in Malaysia seems to be growing due to the increasing Islamisation of the country and the actions of some Christians who seek to expand their constitutionally-defined space. But on the other side, there are movements to strengthen the bonds between the two faith communities. The question is in which way society will develop. Walters writes that in Malaysia "[r]eligion is … profoundly interwoven with race, ethnicity, politics and economics."[36] While this must be kept in mind, each research project has of necessity a limited scope.

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[31] Another corporate dinner has been taking place every Christmas. This has been ongoing for the past five years; see Section 4.2.3 in the literature review.

[32] Danial Dzulkifly, "In True Ramadan Spirit, Muslims and Christians Break Fast Together," malaymail (16. May 2019), https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/05/16/in-true-ramadan-spirit-muslims-and-christians-break-fast-together/1753669.

[33] See Joshua Wu Kai-Ming, "Post-Dialogue Reflections," Blog entry (9. July 2017), https://joshuawu.my/post-dialogue-reflections/. The blog entry also contains links with more information about the event itself.

[34] The document with a commentary is easily accessible in: Miroslav Volf, Prince of Jordan Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington, eds., *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

[35] In the literature review, more examples are mentioned in a systematic way; see section 2.3.2.

[36] Walters, "Issues in Christian–Muslim Relations", 67.

This research will investigate how potential future religious leaders of Islam and Christianity view their own relations with those of the other faith and how the prospects for relationship and dialogue between Muslims and Christians are in the future. These students will, to a great likelihood, in the future speak on behalf of their religious communities, set the course of actions taken by religious institutions, and influence the ordinary Muslim and Christian believers in the country.

1.2 Field of Study

This research was conducted within the Department of Aqidah and Islamic Thought. At this department, the question of how Islam relates to other religions forms one field of study. Topics dealt with here are often labelled as Comparative Religious Studies of which interreligious dialogue is one discipline.

1.3 Research Problem

This study investigates how Malaysian Muslim and Christian postgraduate students of their respective religion are engaged and interested in dialogue with adherents of the other religion.

Taking the religious as well as well as the socio-political context and development in Malaysia into account, it is not clear in which direction interfaith relations will develop.[37] There are movements pulling in different directions as has been illustrated at the end of section 1.1. The literature review (Chapter 2) lays out that religious leaders, through their attitude and example, play a major part in the development of interreligious dialogue.[38] This study focuses on postgraduate students of

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[37] Wan Sabri Wan Yusof and Arfah Ab Majid, "Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia: Past Experience, Present Scenario and Future Challenges," *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah* 3, no. 2 (2013); Lee Hwok Aun, "Fault Lines – and Common Ground – in Malaysia's Ethnic Relations and Policies," *Perspective* 63 (2017).

[38] Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, and Suzy Aziziyana Saili, "Religious Leader (Islam & Christianity) Understanding of Inter-Faith Dialogue Basic Concept in Malaysia and Its Effect to Social Relations," *International Journal of Education and Research* 2, no. 3 (2014); Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Suzy Aziziyana Saili, and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, "Role of Religious Leader in Interfaith Dialogue Towards Conflict Resolution: An Islamic Perspective," ibid., no. 6.

their own religion.[39] Those who have undergone advanced religious education are often afforded the opportunity to assume leadership positions and they will be regarded as knowledgeable in religious matters. One often used definition of leadership is the ability to influence others.[40] While leadership in a religious community does not build on education alone,[41] those who have a comprehensive grasp of their own religious tradition are better equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and credibility to assume leadership roles within their communities. More than many others, they guide the attitude to the "religious other" and set the course of action religious communities take in regard to dialogue.

People with advanced religious education might, for example, assume roles in religious education and scholarship. Muslims may teach in Islamic institutions, universities, or madrasahs; Christians at seminaries, Bible colleges, or other theological institutions (e.g., offering courses for lay leaders). Both Muslim and Christian scholars can contribute to teaching and interpreting religious texts, theology, and doctrines, thereby providing leadership through guiding and educating others in their faith.

Others may rather take the path of providing spiritual guidance and counseling. Christians with advanced degrees might, for example, become pastors and thereby provide spiritual leadership, preach sermons, conduct religious ceremonies, and offer pastoral care to congregants.

Those who have obtained a high-quality academic degree and are able to demonstrate their competence through the writing of articles, books or are present on social media are likely to be taken seriously. Such individuals exert influence over others, which, in the context of this work, renders them leaders of their religious community.

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[39] For a detailed discussion of the selection of research participants, see section 3.1.

[40] See Mohd Rizal Palil, et al., "Leadership and Governance of Islamic Financial Institutions in Malaysia," *Journal of Progressive Research in Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2016), 283. This publication, although from the realm of Islamic finance, was chosen as a reference, because it lists authors from different disciplines and various regions of the world (among them South-East Asia and the U.S.) who work with this definition of leadership.

[41] For example, while an imam or a mosque leader is expected to be educated, there are no requirements in terms of academic qualifications.

Muslim scholars might assume roles in institutions like JAKIM or become state Muftis as they advance in maturity; outstanding Christian scholars might become bishops or represent the Christian community by assuming leadership roles in organizations like the Council of Churches of Malaysia. In these roles, they provide guidance and wield influence not only within their religious community but also beyond it.

Furthermore, official interreligious encounters require well-trained dialogue partners to represent their faith communities competently. While advanced degrees do not guarantee competence, they contribute to it and enhance credibility, fostering successful discourse.

This research was based on the assumption that the interviewed students would likely become influential figures within their religious communities in the future. The interviews confirmed that many of them aspire to become lecturers or clergy – both areas in which they will have an impact on others through their example, teaching and the guidance they provide. Their leadership will not only influence interreligious dialogue in day to day life of the community (dialogue of life), but without their participation and leadership, deeper interreligious intellectual discourse will not take place.[42]

While research has been conducted in Malaysia with students[43] as well as with leaders on the topic of interreligious dialogue, no research so far has investigated students as prospective future leaders of their religious communities and, in addition, has done so in a comparative way, with corresponding questions for Christian and Muslim students.[44]

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[42] For a more detailed discussions, see especially sub-sections 2.3.1.3 and 2.3.1.4 in the literature review.

[43] See especially sections 2.3.2.1 and 2.3.2.2 and the studies mentioned and referenced there. It should be noted that while in this study all research participants were students, 50% of the Muslim participants and almost 80% of the Christian participants were above 30 years of age (see table 3.1). It would be inaccurate to have the mental image of a 20-year-old in mind as a typical participant in this study.

[44] The study that comes closest to what is proposed here was conducted by Khairulnizam Mat Karim and Suzy Aziziyana Saili. They did a comparative study among religious leaders, but were focusing on their understanding of interreligious dialogue concepts; see: Khairulnizam Mat Karim and Suzy Aziziyana Saili, "Measuring Religious Leaders (Muslim-Non-Muslim) Understanding on Interfaith

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions for this research project are as follows:

1. How have Malaysian Muslim and Christian postgraduate students of their respective religion experienced relationships and dialogue with adherents of the other religion?

2. Under consideration of their view of the socio-political and religious environment, how do these students perceive the need for, benefits of and hindrances for dialogue?

3. In which areas and under what circumstances do they feel comfortable to engage in dialogue and would recommend to others to do so, too?

1.5 Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate the experience of dialogue in the life of the Malaysian Muslim and Christian postgraduate students in the field of Religious Studies.

2. To comparatively analyse the attitude towards dialogue by the minority (Christian) and a majority (Muslim) perspectives among these students.

3. To ascertain the prospects for dialogue by laying out hindrances and showing overlaps of perception and interest between the two religious groups.

4. To propose constructive solutions for enhancing the prospects of Muslim-Christian dialogue in Malaysia.

1.6 Significance

This research has significance in a number of ways:

Dialogue Basic Concept and Its Effects to Social Relation: A Preliminary," *The Journal of Islamic Knowledge* 1, no. 2 (2012).

Another paper that is titled similarly as this proposed research is not based on empirical research but describes ways that could influence how dialogue is being conducted in the 21st century (including, for example, the use of the internet); see: Rahimin Affandi Abd. Rahim et al., "Dialog Antara Agama: Realiti Dan Prospek Di Malaysia," *Kajian Malaysia* 29, no. 2 (2011).

First, for the academic realm, it adds to the existing literature about interreligious dialogue by providing data previously not available. A good number of studies have been conducted in Malaysia about Muslim-Christian relations and dialogue, some among leaders and some also among students.[45] No study so far, however, has focused on postgraduate Muslim and Christian students as people who will likely have influence in their religious communities in the future. Also, the scope of this research, inquiring into *experiences* (looking back), *attitudes* (current positions) and *prospects* (looking to the future) of dialogue, reaches beyond the scope of many other studies. By systematically asking the same questions to Muslim and Christian postgraduate students in all three realms, comparison is possible and hindrances as well as overlaps in attitude towards establishing relations and engaging in dialogue have become discernible.

Second, and here lies the emphasis, the research has significance for decision makers at different levels who have an interest in moving dialogue forward. For example, the academic institutions where the students come from are provided with a picture of where their students stand in regard to interreligious dialogue and are enabled to respond in appropriate ways, e.g. by adjusting the curriculum. For leaders of the religious communities, it provides information that can help to realign their religious education programs. Organisations that are interested in promoting dialogue will find data on which they can decide what kind of activities to offer. In general, it provides direction for the decisions about which paths are promising to pursue in Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Third, the research has significance for the students who participated in the research, by making them think about their relations to those of the other religion. Steiner Kvale writes that in research interviews "knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee."[46] In that regard, the interviews which formed the centrepiece of this research, in many cases served as a stimulator to

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[45] See section 2.3.2 in the literature review.
[46] Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (London, UK: SAGE Publications, 2007), ch. 1.

reflect on one's own position, attitude and conduct. Research participants will also be informed about the outcome of the study and can draw their conclusions from it. They will, for example, discover that in general the openness to dialogue and deeper relationships within the other group is greater than adherents of their own religions usually think. As the research participants will, in the future, likely have some sort of leadership positions in their religious communities, the course of action they will take concerning dialogue will also affect the religious communities at large. In this way, there is, albeit indirectly, significance for the society.

Fourth, there is significance for the researcher by learning about the perspectives of Muslims and Christians living together in one society. Coming from Germany, the religious setup is different there. Germany, which has a long Christian heritage, is turning more and more multi-cultural and multi-religious. While perspectives from Malaysia cannot directly be transferred to Germany, the discussions here raised the level of awareness about crucial themes in interreligious relations, especially in regard to majority/minority-perspectives.

1.7 Scope, Delimitations and Limitations

This research focuses on Peninsular Malaysia. The socio-political and religious environment compared to East Malaysia is too different to be viewed together. Therefore, only students were selected who had lived in Peninsular Malaysia for at least five years; they were explicitly asked to answer questions with this regional context in mind.

It was not part of this project to carry out activities of interreligious dialogue. The research was limited to finding out the current state, the attitudes, perception and interest towards interreligious dialogue among the participants in the research.

As mentioned above, only Muslim and Christian postgraduate students were asked to participate in the study; it would have been too far reaching to include adherents of other religions.

The study was purposely limited to students in postgraduate programs[47] and was conducted in English. As for every study, the criteria for the selection of research participants have an impact on the transferability of the results to groups beyond the selection criteria.

1.8 Assumptions

The study started with the assumption that students who study their own religion on an advanced level are likely to one day have an influence or take leadership positions in their religious communities. While only the future will show which roles and positions the students involved in this study will hold, they confirmed that they aspire to become leaders in local congregations or lecturers in the realm of academia.[48] The assumption was thus confirmed by the students.

1.9 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. After this introduction, a literature review (Chapter 2) will introduce concepts and theological foundations for dialogue from Muslim as well as Christian perspective and then look into academic literature and dialogue initiatives that originate in Malaysia. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology used for this research.

The long Chapter 4, in which the data will be presented, is divided into five sections: The first will deal with students' experiences of, the next three with their attitudes towards and the last with openness towards dialogue. Chapter 5 moves a step further by interpreting and discussing the data. Chapter 6, the Conclusion, deals with practical implications and suggests areas for further research.

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[47] Programmes above the Bachelor level; in North America these programs are usually referred to as graduate programs. The different designations have caused some confusion in the selection of research participants.

[48] See the end of section 5.1 and also section 3.1.1 for the rationale for the selection of research participants

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review follows a logical sequence: It first clarifies the theoretical concept of interreligious dialogue and then investigates the theological foundations for dialogue according to Muslim and Christian understanding. The perspective is then narrowed down to the specific context of Malaysia.

The aim for this review is to provide a theoretical framework, the necessary theory and language for the setup of the research project. The questions for the questionnaire and the interview guide that have been used in the research spring from the engagement with the literature discussed here. Furthermore, the gap this research fills will be identified by taking into account the academic literature produced by academicians and the dialogue initiatives that have taken place already in Malaysia.

2.1 The Concept and Theory of Dialogue

The literature about interreligious dialogue is vast and a good structure is needed to provide orientation. This first part will be divided in three sub-sections: First the possible definitions for interreligious dialogue will be discussed, followed by the goals or motivations for interreligious dialogue. The third sub-section will then deal with a discussion of modes of dialogue mentioned in the literature.

There is a flood of literature about interreligious dialogue. The discussion will focus on the contributions of Christian authors Charles Kimball and Douglas Pratt, and Muslim authors Muhammad Shafiq, Mohammed Abu-Nimer; supplemented by others where needed.

2.1.1 Definitions of interreligious dialogue

The term interreligious dialogue has been variously defined. Etymologically it is clear that "[d]ialogue comes from the Greek *dia-logos*, and not from the non-existent *di-logos*, which would mean a duologue. 'Dia' is a prefix that means 'through, between,

across, throughout.' … *Logos* comes from *legein*, which means 'to speak', but the former can also mean 'thought.'"[49]

The word "inter-" means "between" and the word religion has made its way into the English language and its definition is notoriously difficult[50] and for the sake of this study it is enough to take it as the rough designation of faith communities like Islam and Christianity.

Based on the roots of the term, interreligious dialogue can therefore be defined as people of different religions conversing through words, or, put simply: a conversation[51] between people of different religions.

Scholars often went beyond this basic definition and suggested more detailed ones. Charles Kimball defines Muslim-Christian dialogue as "[i]ntentional, structured encounters between Muslims and Christians… Interfaith[52] dialogue is a conversation in which two or more parties seek to express their views accurately and to listen respectfully to their counterparts."[53]

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[49] Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); italics in original.

[50] Well summarized by Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman: "Thus religions not only mean many things to many people, but their nature and character too are also quite different from each other." *Religion and Pluralistic Co-Existence: The Muhibah Perspective (a Collection of Seminar Papers)* (Kuala Lumpur, MY: IIUM Press, 2010), 4; for defining aspects of religions, see ch. 2 of the same book.

[51] This is the word suggested by: Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language: Dealing with the Origin of Words and Their Sense Development Thus Illustrating the History of Civilization and Culture* (Amsterdam, DK: Elsevier, 1971), 210.

[52] Kimball's article is specifically about Muslim-Christian dialogue. He seems not to distinguish between interreligious dialogue and interfaith dialogue. Many authors take the words interchangeably. Some, however, make the following distinction: "The expression *interfaith* seems to be used in a more expansive and inclusive way than *interreligious* and is considered to encompass ideologies and systems of belief which transcend specific religious identification, including, for example, humanists and secularists. It is also a term regularly used in political and social circles, to speak about social cohesion, the importance of members of different faiths and religions working together for the common good, and the elusive search for peace between religions." ("Called to Dialogue: Interreligious and Intra-Christian Dialogue in Ecumenical Conversation," World Council of Churches, https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/called-to-dialogue; italics in original).

[53] "Muslim-Christian Dialogue," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World. Oxford Islamic Studies Online* (https://www-oxfordreference-com.fuller.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780195305135.001.0001/acref-9780195305135-e-0567, 2009)

Shafiq and Abu-Nimer write: "When we talk about interfaith dialogue, we generally mean dialogue among religious communities in order to understand each other's religion and build bridges toward a pluralistic and peaceful society."[54]

Kimball includes much of the *modes* of dialogue in his definition; Shafiq and Abu-Nimer what they understand as the *goal* of dialogue. Moyaert is right when she writes that

> "[d]epending on the participants (laypeople, religious leaders, theologians, and monks), the structure (local/international, small/large-scale, bilateral/multilateral), and the themes to be discussed (everyday concerns, ethical challenges, spiritual experiences, doctrinal issues, etc.), interreligious dialogue can take different forms."[55]

The KAICIID Dialogue Centre on its website first defines dialogue in general terms as "a process that involves mutual consultation in pursuit of common understanding through active and compassionate listening in order to discover similarities and understand differences in diverse perspectives and points of view." It then goes on to build in the "interreligious" component into the definition:

> "Interreligious (also sometimes called interfaith) dialogue follows the same definition as above, but with one difference: this dialogue takes place between people of different religious backgrounds who seek to learn more about one another.
> Interreligious dialogue is not about winning converts or theological discussion. It concerns the discovery of similarities and differences between diverse religious/faith standpoints as a means of establishing trust and building a community of common purpose across religious boundaries.
> Through interreligious dialogue, religious communities can overcome perceived and real differences to collectively address challenges in their local, national, regional, or global contexts, such as hate speech, injustice, or environmental degradation."[56]

This is a comprehensive and useful *conceptual* definition of interreligious dialogue that includes means, methods and goals.

For this research project, it is nevertheless helpful to use a shorter definition; one that could also be used in the interviews with the students. Sallie King writes that "it is

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[54] Muhammad Shafiq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims*, 2nd ed. (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011), 33.

[55] Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue," 201.

[56] KAICIID Dialogue Centre, "What Is Dialogue?" https://www.kaiciid.org/dialogue.

best to define interreligious dialogue as "intentional encounter and interaction among members of different religions *as* members of different religions."[57] This definition is close to the basic meaning of the constituent etymological parts of the term "interreligious dialogue", short enough to be used as *operational* definition for this project and wide enough to account for diverse aspects. Because it is so wide, it is necessary to discuss the various ways how the definition can be filled; this is what will be dealt with in the next two sub-sections.

2.1.2 Motivation and Goals of interreligious dialogue

The literature does not always distinguish sharply between aims, purposes and motivation for dialogue. The central question is: What do scholars expect interreligious dialogue can achieve? In one passage, where Pratt deals with the aims of dialogue, he mentions a threefold aim: First, it should help to build "greater mutual respect and better understanding of each other," second, it should assist participants to a "deepening and a renewal of spirituality," and, third, it should encourage them to "acceptance and fulfilment of common practical responsibilities."[58] At another passage (and referring to David Lochhead), he also writes about interreligious dialogue as an aid to understand one's own faith better and to increase one's own loyalty towards it.[59] Stated simply, there are three foci: the other (that one wants to learn to understand and respect), oneself (with one's own faith and spirituality), and the society (to seek the common good). He highlights the need for people of different religions to understand each other as partners and not as competitors in order to foster peace and understanding. Religions should not contribute to division and discord, but to reconciliation and well-being. This, it seems, is an overarching goal of interreligious dialogue.

Shafiq and Abu-Nimer share many of these goals. They write:

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[57] Sallie B. King, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad V. Meister (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 101 (italic in original). The last part of the definition ("*as* members of different religions") is understood in the way that when people meet, they are aware that they belong to different religions.

[58] Douglas Pratt, *Being Open, Being Faithful: The Journey of Interreligious Dialogue* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 2014), 14.

[59] Ibid., 7.

"The goal of dialogue is not to eliminate differences of opinion and conviction, but to gain an understanding and acceptance of those differences. Dialogue is not about seeking to defeat or silence others, but about learning, understanding, and increasing one's knowledge of them."[60]

This is equivalent with Pratt's first goal. Also, in regard to one's own benefit, the authors mention a growing steadfastness in one's own religion through dialogue[61] and a spiritual transformation of the participants,[62] although they do not treat these aspects explicitly as goals, but as outcomes of dialogue. A point they emphasize even stronger than Pratt is the goal to collaborate and to "[combine] different strengths for the welfare of humanity"[63] One aim that runs like a thread throughout their book is to "build bridges for peaceful coexistence."[64] So far the authors are in agreement with each other.

Shafiq and Abu-Nimer mention two firmly connected goals that go beyond those of Pratt. One is "to struggle against negative conditioning and fanaticism"[65] and the other to change people's negative perception of Islam and thus help to reduce discrimination.[66] Something important can be learned here: Shafiq and Abu-Nimer write from a minority perspective; in this case as Muslims in the United States. If minority religious groups want to become an integral part of society and not seclude themselves, interreligious dialogue seems to be a promising way to achieve this.

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[60] Shafiq and Abu-Nimer, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 1.

[61] Ibid., 11.

[62] Ibid., 38.

[63] Ibid., 2.

[64] Ibid., 17. This point could be established from many other sources. Alwani Ghazali et al. write: "Through dialogue, prejudice and ill-thinking are eliminated and replaced with the hope to be able to co-exist harmoniously despite the differences." Alwani Ghazali, Muhammad Kamal, and Zambrie Ibrahim @ Musa, *Peaceful Co-Existence in New Malaysia: Lessons from Muslim History and Some Elementary Challenges (Pre-Publication Version)* (2018). Elius et al., put it this way: "The prime cause of interreligious dialogue is to gather the followers of different faiths and make a worthwhile contribution to interreligious harmony and co-existence." Mohammad Elius et al., "Islam as a Religion of Tolerance and Dialogue: A Critical Appraisal," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 18, no. 52 (2019), 98.

[65] Shafiq and Abu-Nimer, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 2.

[66] Ibid., xviii-xxi. It is interesting to note that in the eyes of some Muslim authors, one reason Christians initiated interreligious dialogue after World War II was to reduce prejudices against Christians held by adherents of other religions; see: Azarudin Bin Awang and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, "Dialog Agama Lwn Dialog Kehidupan: Membina Kefahaman Kehidupan Masyarakat Yang Berbeza Kepercayaan," *Jurnal Peradaban* 5, no. December (2012), 4.

As with interreligious dialogue as a whole, there can be critical voices in regard to the different aims and these aims might also be differently defined. When it comes to spiritual renewal and transformation through dialogue, how far should that go and by what means should it be achieved? Goals and means are often intrinsically connected in regard to religious practices. While a Christian's active participation in a Friday Prayer or a Muslim's active participation in a time of Praise & Worship at the beginning of a Church service might enhance their understanding of awe and dedication to God, it also raises concerns about faithfulness and loyalty to one's faith. Understanding these dynamics also hinges on the view of other religions in relation to one's own.[67] Although these options will not be dealt with here in detail, when it comes to dialogue in practice, the goals people of different religions may find to be achievable and the means they consider appropriate to achieve these goals will depend to a huge extent on these underlying presumptions.

2.1.3 Modes of interreligious dialogue

In which ways can interreligious dialogue actually take place? Scholars have identified a number of modes or means.

Charles Kimball mentions five modes of Muslim-Christian dialogue, namely (1) Parliamentary dialogue: conducted by leading religious bodies; (2) Institutional dialogue: initiatives and meetings for dialogue organized by institutions; (3) Theological dialogue: gatherings where theological and philosophical subjects are being discussed by scholars; (4) Dialogue in community or Dialogue of Life: day-to-day interactions, collaboration for the common good and discussion of practical aspects of living together; (5) Spiritual dialogue: interfaith encounters that aim to enrich the spiritual life of those participating in it.[68] Although the first three of his five modes focus on verbal exchange about religious content, his last two points show that interreligious dialogue as

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[67] For the discussion of the different options from exclusivism to inclusivism and pluralism (with their different varieties) in relation to interreligious dialogue, see: Pratt, *Being Open, Being Faithful*, 20-38.

[68] Kimball, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue,".

it is understood today goes beyond that.[69] Spending time together, working together and making spiritual experiences together can all be seen as aspects of dialogue and came to be understood as such in the relevant literature.

Pratt, in his discussion, first mentions four models that have been widely acknowledged and go back to documents from the Roman Catholic Church:[70] (1) dialogue of life, (2) dialogue of action, (3) dialogue of experience, and (4) dialogue of discourse. They are in line with those suggested by Kimball. Kimball's first three models fit under Pratt's fourth model (discourse) and Kimball's fourth model combines Pratt's second and third model (life and action). Both mention spiritual dialogue.

But then, Pratt adds other models that the World Council of Churches employed. Noteworthy of these is what he calls systemic dialogue. Here, it is not certain religious questions that are being discussed (like the nature of God, conversion, etc.). Instead, "the focus of the systemic model of dialogue is on the interaction of faith-systems as such."[71] It can be seen as a discussion on a more fundamental level; however, according to Pratt, this kind of dialogue is not very often used today; the concrete, relational, communitarian models are favoured instead.

The model Pratt wished would be embarked on more is what he terms "transcendental dialogue, or the dialogue of intentional cognitive (that is, theological/ideological) engagement." It is related to the just mentioned, somehow buried systemic model. His concern is that dialogue must go to the depths of the religions and the faith, not gloss over difficult aspects for the sake of harmony. He

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[69] This also shows that his definition of interreligious dialogue (se 1.1, above) is too narrow.

[70] See: Pontifical Council For Inter-Religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," Vatican (19. May 1991), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html. There is a reference in this document that these four forms have already been mentioned in a document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1984 (see footnotes 17 and 2 there; however, this document can only be accessed in Portuguese on the Vatican's Website: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19840610_dialogo-missione_po.html).

[71] Pratt, *Being Open, Being Faithful*, 77.

envisions dialogue that is also willing to include mutual critique.[72] By that, he hopes to deepen interreligious dialogue and to overcome impasses in which the process sometimes gets stuck. He admits, though, that official church bodies are not likely to promote this kind of dialogue in fear it could shake core doctrines or ask for too much change of convictions held deeply.[73]

Moving to perspectives of Muslim scholars, Shafiq and Abu-Nimer focus on dialogue models that can be implemented on the local level. They therefore do not deal with gatherings of scholars or with high-level representatives. However, they have themselves actively participated in the Conflict Transformation Program[74] which included scholarly debates.[75] The different aspects they highlight can be fitted under the four big categories mentioned above that seem to be somehow fundamental (dialogue of life, action, experience and discourse).

Mat Zain et al. who have surveyed different models of interreligious dialogue come to no other conclusion; except that they see the religious experience dialogue and co-'ritual' dialogue as something exclusively for high-ranking religious leaders.[76]

According to King, Western norms and ways of thinking have given shape to interreligious dialogue.[77] Historically she is right. However, when one looks at Muslim

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[72] There are authors who strongly differentiate between dialogue and debate and hold the position to leave anything aside that could endanger harmony in the dialogue process. Shehu, for example, who emphasizes the aspect of peace-building through dialogue, urges not to "discuss themes of comparative or critical nature in inter-religious engagements." Fatmir Shehu, "Inter-Religious Dialogue and Contemporary Peace-Building: From Hostility to Mutual Respect and Better Understanding," *Beder Journal of Humanities* 1, no. 3 (2014), 65. It seems unreasonable to exclude tense topics completely, but to discuss them in a fruitful way, trust between the conversation partners will need to be built first.

[73] Other authors have suggested additional elements of dialogue, but they only bring slight variations to what has already been mentioned. King provides a list of seven types of dialogue and includes, for example, intervisitation. Otherwise, she remains largely within what has been mentioned so far. (See: "Interreligious Dialogue," 101-02).

[74] See J. Dudley Woodberry, "Reflections on Christian-Muslim Dialogue," Fuller Studio (2010), https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/reflections-christian-muslim-dialogue/.

[75] See their contributions to the book that was the outcome of two scholarly conferences that were part of the program: Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David W. Augsburger, eds., *Peace-Building by between, and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

[76] No reasons are given for this limitation; they refer to a working paper at a conference in 2006 by Khadijah Mohd Hambali @ Khambali and Khairul Nizam Mat Karim; See: Aemy Elyani Mat Zain, Jaffary Awang, and Idris Zakaria, "Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Perspective of Malaysian Contemporary Muslim Thinkers," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 5, no. June (2014), 4-6

[77] See: "Interreligious Dialogue," 104.

authors or at initiatives that grew outside the Western world, it seems that goals and means of interreligious dialogue do not differ significantly.[78]

It is neither possible nor necessary to demarcate more clearly the different types, modes or models of interreligious dialogue. There are some elements that occur in different combinations as King writes after she has introduced her types of dialogue:

> "Some of the factors involved in this typology are (a) whether a type of dialogue is, or must be, practiced by an official or elite group or is open to all; (b) whether its goals are primarily on the personal level (understanding, spiritual growth) or on the community or social level (to resolve intercommunity conflicts, to avert violence); (c) whether it works with the human intellect, human spirituality, human emotions, practical action, or some combination of these. These factors can combine in all manner of ways, and as a consequence, there can be no standard list of types of dialogue."[79]

How exactly certain dialogue initiatives will be set up will have much to do with the goals that the initiators envision and with the context in which the dialogue is planned to take place.[80]

2.1.4 Conclusion

This section of the literature review started with a wide definition of interreligious dialogue to be able to include different goals and means. It has become obvious that Muslim and Christian scholars define these goals and means rather similarly, although there are variations among Muslims and among Christians. For example, those who have a vision of pluralism of religions will accentuate aims and modes of interreligious dialogue different from those with a more exclusive outlook, but these streams of thought are present among scholars of both religions. A major

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[78] An article by the author of this work that investigates major interreligious dialogue initiatives – some of them under Muslim/Arab leadership – supports this thesis. There is one point in which some of the initiatives birthed in the Arab world do differ from many in the West, namely a greater involvement and more direct role of governments and some of their highest representatives; see Herrmann, "Major Muslim-Christian Dialogue Initiatives since 9/11," *KATHA, Official Journal of the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, Universiti Malaya*, no. 17 (2021).

[79] King, "Interreligious Dialogue," 102.

[80] See: Wan Sabri Wan Yusof and Arfah Ab Majid, "Inter-Religious Dialogue Models in Malaysia," *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah* 2, no. 1 (2012), 7.

responsibility to initiate and sustain these processes lies on those who have the right to speak on behalf of their religious communities.

2.2 Theological Foundations for Dialogue according to Muslim and Christian Scholars

For Muslims and Christians who take their faith seriously, to engage in interreligious dialogue must have good theological reasons. It is therefore necessary to look at the fundamental theological texts for Muslims and Christians and their respective interpretation.

Before highlighting aspects from the perspective of Muslim and then of Christian scholars, a point that Fatmir Shehu makes (and Christians would also agree to) is worth being noted. He reminds that the Qur'an as well as the Bible emphasize the creation of the world and the first human beings within the framework of a monotheistic worldview. In both religions, there exists the vision of a shared humanity under God.[81] Khan et al. argue that "[a] comprehensive idea of unity is expressed here by reminding man of the origin of humankind."[82] This fundamental conviction can serve as a theological point of departure to lead Muslims and Christians to seeking a life in human companionship.

2.2.1 The Muslim Perspective

From an historical perspective, the starting point for the discussion of interreligious dialogue is quite different in Islam and Christianity. Christianity started in Israel, as a group within the Jewish faith and only after a period of time was seen as a religion of itself. The other religion it was most exposed to (partially within Israel, but more when it spread westward) was the religions of the Romans with its Hellenistic connections. Islam, on the other hand, developed in the midst of a multi-religious environment in which Christianity and Judaism were very much part of. Whereas the

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[81] See the references in his article: Shehu, "Inter-Religious Dialogue and Contemporary Peace-Building", 67-68.

[82] "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam," *SAGE Open* 10, no. 4 (2020), 5.

discussion of Christian theological foundations will focus more on theological arguments based on an overall understanding of God and his dealing with this world, the discussion of the Islamic foundations can start right at the text of the Qur'an, the Hadiths and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. This is, in fact, where the discussion must start according to Shah et al., as the Qur'an gives guidance and sets the standard for Muslims in all questions, including that of interreligious dialogue.[83] In doing so, it is, of course, important to consider the entire range of passages, not only those that stand out in favour of dialogue.[84]

2.2.1.1 Passages in support of dialogue

There are numerous verses in the Qur'an that can be interpreted as supporting dialogue between Muslims and the People of the Book. Authors like Shafiq and Abu-Nimer take Surah 2:256: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" as a foundational text for dialogue.[85] It shows that no pressure whatsoever must be applied on people who are not part of the *ummah*.[86]

The Qur'an posits that the existence of people in different nations and tribes serves a purpose. Surah 5:48 states: "If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues" and Surah 49:13 adds: "O mankind! We created you from a single

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[83] Faisal Ahmad Shah et al., "Interfaith Dialogue: Approaches, Ethics, and Issues," *International Journal of Asian Social Science* 3, no. 12 (2013), 2456-57.

[84] Hussain is right when he writes: "One of the challenges faced by Muslims in an honest interfaith dialogue is to come to terms with the full range of verses that address the issue of relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim communities." Amir Hussain, "Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2003), 254. See also: Ahmet Kurucan and Mustafa Kasim Erol, *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an, Sunnah, History* (London, UK: Dialogue Society, 2012), 28.

[85] Shafiq and Abu-Nimer, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 2.

[86] Ayoub highlights the centrality of this verse for the idea of Islamic tolerance. But he also mentions that classical Qur'an commentators agree that it was revealed in answer to a concrete circumstance. A father whose two sons had become Christians wanted to know from the Prophet what to do as his attempts to call them back to the Islamic faith had been in vain. Then this verse was revealed to the Prophet (Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), ch. 2). What becomes evident here is that interpreters and scholars in general have to decide how much weight to give to a certain passage.

(pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)."

Some progressive scholars have taken verses like these to push for a pluralistic agenda. Amir Hussain, for example, writes, based on Surah 5:48: "Unfortunately, there are Muslims in North America and around the world who have no interest in pluralism. They see Islam as the only true religion."[87] This, of course, would go too far for others who take this passage to acknowledge that there are different religions and that their adherents should learn to live in peace with each other.

Two last verses deserve to be mentioned here:

"And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury); but say, 'We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is One; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam).'" (Surah 29:46)

"Say: 'O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah.' If then they turn back, say ye: 'Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's Will).'" (Surah 3:64)

The first verse shows the Islamic understanding that the revelation the Prophet Muhammad received builds on and connects to earlier revelations as it is also stated in Surah 2:136 and that therefore the People of the Book should be treated with respect. The second verse is an invitation and an exhortation to the People of the Book to come to a common understanding that is based on the oneness of God.

Scholars who write on the topic of interreligious dialogue also point out the many instances in the life of the Prophet where he gave an example of what it means to establish dialogue with adherents of other religions and to live with them peacefully.[88]

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[87] Hussain, "Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue," 260. He still upholds that Islam is a missionary religion and holds an exclusive truth claim (255). How he can reconcile these two statements is not obvious.

[88] As with all historic accounts, there are questions about their authenticity and reliability. Souleiman Mourad notes that there are three approaches among scholars in the field of Islamic studies in this regard, namely the descriptive, the source-critical, and the skeptical approach. For the sake of this paper I follow the descriptive approach that takes the texts at face value. See: Suleiman A. Mourad, "Christians and Christianity in the Sīra of Muhammad," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema, History of Christian-Muslim Relations (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2009), 57.

Kurucan and Erol[89] as well as Elius et al.[90] list various examples and Alwani Ghazali provides an in depth study of some of the incidents.[91]

In the early days of the Islamic movement, believers had to flee from Mecca. The Prophet sent them to Abyssinia to find refuge with the Negus, the Christian king there. He welcomed them, protected them and when they relayed their belief to them, he replied that what they said and what Jesus proclaimed must come from the same source.[92]

After the emigration to Yathrib, the Prophet Muhammad set up a treaty (Medina Charter)[93] with the various tribes there. Yathrib at that time had a notable Jewish population and a small Christian minority.[94] The charter included regulations for peaceful living of all people within the same city. Bakar sees in the treaty a positive example for how societies with people of different cultures, ethnicities and religions can function.[95]

A final example comes from the time when a Christian delegation from Najran came to Medina. The prophet welcomed them, treated them with courtesy and allowed them to pray in the mosque. There were conversations between them and the Prophet about religious themes like the divinity of Jesus and his death as a sacrifice. A treaty was sealed between them to regulate the protection of the Christians and their ability to practice their religion.

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[89] *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an, Sunnah, History*, ch. 3.

[90] "Islam as a Religion of Tolerance and Dialogue", 101-03.

[91] "Dialogic Thinking in the Sīrah: Its Application and Significance in Contemporary Muslim Discourse" (The University of Melbourne, 2015), see especially chapter 3.

[92] Ishaq bin Muhammad, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah. With an Introduction and Notes by A. Guillaume* (Karachi, PAK: Oxford University Press, 1967 (1955)), 152.

[93] The full text in an English translation is found in: ibid., 231-33.

[94] Yetkin Yildirim, "The Medina Charter: A Historical Case of Conflict Resolution," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4 (2009).

[95] Bakar explains: "The document was not the result of the Prophet (*pbuh*) imposing his own views and will on both the Muslim community and non-Muslim communities in Medina. The peace treaty and alliance between the Muslims and the Jews and Pagans were based on mutual consultations and dialogues between them." Osman Bakar, "Theological Foundation of Interfaith Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence: The Qurʹan's Universal Perspectives," in *Peace-Building by between, and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David W. Augsburger (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 151.

It should be noted that some of the reviews of the life of the Prophet Muhmmad, especially when they are written with the agenda to further interreligious dialogue, tend to leave out those aspects that could shed a not so favourable light on the relationships and on the way non-Muslims were treated. In Elius et al,[96] for example, there is no mention that the occasion for the visit was a rather harsh letter written from the Prophet to the bishop of Najran in which he called upon the Christians to become Muslims, otherwise they would have to pay the *jizya* and if they refused to, threatened them with war.[97] They also do not mention Muhammad's announcement of a mutual invocation of a curse from Allah if they opposed him[98] or the taxes levied on the Christians as part of the treaty.[99]

If these texts are being used to show the Prophet's (or in general, Islam's) positive treatment of adherents of other religions, it is certainly helpful to disclose all aspects at the beginning, and, where necessary, explain why even with the more difficult aspects in consideration, these texts can serve as basis and provide positive examples for interreligious dialogue today.

2.2.1.2 Dealing with texts that seem to stand against dialogue

Some readers outside the Muslim spheres and even the Muslim extremists too have misunderstood some verses of the Quran. The explicit meaning of the verses, when taken individually as a stand-alone, disregarding of their contexts, could have been misunderstood as proposing enmity to the Jews and Christians (see, for example, Surahs 2:120; 2:191; 5:51).[100]

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[96] Elius et al., "Islam as a Religion of Tolerance and Dialogue".

[97] See Ahmed El-Wakil, "The Prophet's Treaty with the Christians of Najran: An Analytical Study to Determine the Authenticity of the Covenants," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27, no. 3 (2016), 320. El-Wakil describes the letter as "rather aggressive in tone" and adds that concerning the relations with the Christians from Najran "the Islamic sources … do not at any point depict any kind of close friendship between them and the Muslims"; rather there exists a "confrontational tone" and a "semi-hostile attitude found in the Islamic sources" (321).

[98] Ishaq bin Muhammad, *The Life of Muhammad*, 277.

[99] These included the provision of 1000 garments every six months and a fiscal tax; see: El-Wakil, "The Prophet's Treaty with the Christians of Najran", 279; M. Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet* (Markfield, UK: Islamic Foundation, 2002), 751.

[100] This issue is discussed, among others, by Kurucan and Erol, *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an, Sunnah, History*, 29. See also: Khan et al., "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam", 4

Kurucan and Erol have argued that people who are opposed to dialogue read some verses superficially, not taking into account whether they were spoken in a situation of war or peace and so making them generally applicable.[101] Tariq Ramadan formulates more cautiously. He does not start with the presumption that people come to the text with a certain agenda but starts with the question of one's general hermeneutical approach. Depending on one's hermeneutic, the "difficult" verses are variously interpreted. He states that "[a]ll religious traditions experience these differences, and, depending on the type of reading that is accepted, one may be open to dialogue or absolutely opposed to it."[102] In his own approach he is similar to Kurucan and Erol who argue for interpretation of the passages that takes serious (1) the exact issues or circumstances that were addressed, (2) the historic context, (3) the wider context, and (4) that individual texts needed to be interpreted in light of other passages of the Qur'an.[103]

On the example of the prohibition not to make friends with unbelievers, they illustrate that these verses were revealed in times of war, which is not the normal situation. "[P]eace is the default position. It is the most desirable state, to be welcomed wherever it is feasible."[104] They then quote various passages of the Qur'an to buttress their claim (Surah 8:61; 2:224); thus showing that an individual verse should be understood in the context of the entire revelation.

The issue of possible misunderstanding of the concept of abrogation (*naskh*)[105] is another aspect of concern when dealing with dialogue. *Naskh* is actually a sophisticated discipline which requires certain rules and auxiliary sciences to understand the Qur'an. Abrogation cannot be understood superficially as simply later verses

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[101] *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an, Sunnah, History*, 29.

[102] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 208.

[103] *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an, Sunnah, History*, 29. Elius et al. call this approach "contextual analysis." ("Islam as a Religion of Tolerance and Dialogue", 97).

[104] *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an, Sunnah, History*, 39.

[105] For an introduction to the issue of abrogation, see Stefan Wild, "Abrogation", in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London, UK: Routledge, 2006), 3-6.

cancelling out previous verses on similar topics as claimed by Robert Spencer.[106] An example mentioned repeatedly in the literature in this regard is the so-called "verse of the sword" in Surah 9:5. Justin Parrott writes: "Anti-Muslim writers, and some extremist Muslims, make the far-fetched claim that all verses in the Qur'an encouraging peace, mercy, and fairness with non-Muslims have been abrogated by the so-called 'verse of the sword'."[107] It should be noted that people do not necessarily have to be anti-Muslim to be influenced by such interpretations. The issue is more complicated than many assume and their half knowledge about abrogation might lead them to wrong conclusions. Parrott notes that there were in fact some Islamic scholars during the classical period who argued that Surah 9:5 abrogated other verses. However, this did not mean that "[t]he previous rule was … nullified, invalidated, or canceled entirely." Rather, "it was changed or 'abrogated' to account for a new situation."[108]

The fact that contemporary Muslim scholars treat the issue (whether Surah 9:5 abrogated other verses) repeatedly, evidences the need to correct false understandings which may also have impacted dialogue partners of Muslims. If Christians have been influenced by the opinion that Surah 9:5 trumps and simply nullifies those verses that encourage good relationships with non-Muslims, they may regard Islam as a hostile religion and see little meaning in serious dialogue. It is therefore important that Muslims are able to address this topic both convincingly and in line with sound theology and thereby remove the obstacle it could cause for dialogue.[109] Some Muslim scholars have pathed the way and their reasoning shall be introduced briefly.

To begin with, it is important to notice that while the concept of *naskh* is an important discipline with roots in the Qur'an and Sunnah itself and is upheld by the vast majority of Islamic scholars it is also more nuanced than people with limited knowledge

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[106] *A Religion of Peace?: Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn't* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2007). Spencer designates himself an Islamophobe.

[107] Justin Parrott, "Have the Peaceful Verses of the Qur'ān Been Abrogated?" whyislam.org (23 May 2019), https://www.whyislam.org/misconceptions/peacefulverses/.

[108] Ibid.

[109] This is pointed out by Hussain, "Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue," 254.

of Islam might realize.[110] Parrott notes that "the word [abrogation] has been used to mean everything from a complete repeal to a narrowly limited exception. Types of partial abrogation came to be known as 'specification' (*takhsis*), 'restriction' (*taqyid*), 'explanation' (*tafsir*), 'clarification' (*tabyin*), 'exceptional' (*istithna'*), and 'conditional' (*shart*)."[111]

Based on this more nuanced perspective and supported by many other scholars, Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi comes to the conclusion that "[a]lmost all of these '*mansookh*' verses can still be said to apply when the Muslims are in a situation similar to the situation in which these verses were revealed. Thus, the 'Verse of the Sword' in reality does not abrogate a large number of verses; in fact, az-Zarqaanee concludes that it does not abrogate *any* verse."[112] In his own assessment, Yasir Qadhi sees Qur'an 9:5 specifying (*takshees*) instead of abrogating (*naskh*) other verses.[113] If this difference is not taken note of, it will lead to wrong conclusions.

Mahfuh Halimi, in his study of abrogation and the "sword-verse" argues for a "situational exegesis" that seeks to understand the revelation of the different Surahs "within a specific time, place and set of circumstances".[114] Verses like Qur'an 9:5, revealed during a time of war, cannot be applied in the same way "when developments in the contemporary world that accept plurality and diversity in religious beliefs are taken into consideration."[115] One of his main arguments is that "[t]he Qur'ān must be studied in its entirety to grasp the full spectrum of the message."[116] If done so, it will become clear "that verses advocating peace, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness are perspicuous verses that cannot be abrogated"[117] as their meaning is foundational for

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[110] See: Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Science of the Qur'an* (Birmingham, UK: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999), 235-236, 240-243.

[111] "Have the Peaceful Verses of the Qur'ān Been Abrogated?" whyislam.org (23 May 2019), https://www.whyislam.org/misconceptions/peacefulverses/.

[112] Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Science of the Qur'an*, 254.

[113] See: Ibid.

[114] Mahfuh Halimi. "Abrogation and the Verse of the Sword: Countering Extremists' Justification for Violence." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9 (2017), 34.

[115] Ibid., 35.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid.

Islam as a religion. The start of each but one Surah with reference to "God, the Compassionate and Merciful" is, according to Halimi, further indication "that in essence, mercy and peace are integral to the Qur'ān"[118]. As a consequence, it is unfitting to argue that one verse could abrogate many verses that support this overall orientation.

To conclude these theological considerations based on the Islamic sources, it might be helpful to refer to the Muslim authors of the document "A Common Word between Us and You"[119] as their approach may lead the way. For them, the unity of God, love of him and love of others were seen as being of greatest importance. Starting from there, they were seeking the dialogue with Christians while making clear that they would not compromise on anything that is essential to their faith.[120] For Muslims who do not agree with the pluralistic paradigm that all religions are valid in the same way and at the end lead to the same goal,[121] this approach seems to be a viable way to be part of interreligious dialogue.

2.2.1.3 Dialogue in the context of *da'wah*

One important aspect needs to be added: In Islam, interreligious activities cannot be seen merely to enhance mutual understanding and respect. They must be understood within the framework of *da'wah*, which has a broad meaning, but includes the call to Islam. Surah 16:125 states clearly: "Invite all to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice, and only debate with them in the best manner." In the Qur'an, "Muhammad is referred to as 'God's caller' or 'God's invitor,' *da'i Allah* (46:31)."[122] There is therefore a direct link between interreligious dialogue and an invitation to

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[118] Ibid., 33.

[119] In: Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Yarrington, *A Common Word*.

[120] See the comments of Ghazi bin Muhammad about what was not intended by launching the initiative, in: "On "a Common Word between Us and You"," in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 9-12.

[121] An approach sharply criticized by Ghazi bin Muhammad; ibid.

[122] Christer Hedin, Torsten Janson, and David Westerlund, "Da'wa," in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2004), 170.

Islam. An application for Muslims' dialogue with others is therefore an attitude in which the objective of dialogue includes the aim "to propagate the truth."[123]

Arfah Ab. Majid argues that in Malaysia, interreligious dialogue and exposure to other people's faith is sometimes perceived by Muslims as a threat to their faith and thus seen with suspicion.[124] She argues that, rightly understood and practiced, interreligious dialogue is not a threat to *Aqidah*, but a platform for *da'wah*. She investigates the programs conducted by the Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM), the Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI) and the Islamic Information Services (IIS). They offer a wide range of dialogue initiatives and designs that all include aspects of *da'wah* and can be categorized in four types, namely: collective inquiry; critical-dialogic education; conflict resolution and peace building; and community building and social action.[125] The initiatives are manifold, including mosque tours, free Islamic classes, seminars, public forums, etc. Their *da'wah*-character can be seen in the attempts "to eradicate negative perceptions and sentiments about Islam through dialogue" or by using the platforms to "attract non-Muslims to its program[s]".[126]

For Arfah Ab. Majid the argument that inter-religious dialogue could become a threat to one's *Aqidah* is unfounded. She argues with Surah 2:256: "Let there be no compulsion in religion, for the truth stands out clearly from falsehood. So whoever renounces false gods and believes in Allah has certainly grasped the firmest, unfailing hand-hold. And Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing." In this context she emphasizes the second sentence, arguing that "those who have faith in Allah will never easily go astray since the truth will always prevail."[127] Conducted rightly, interreligious dialogue will do the opposite of leading people astray: it will serve as a tool to testify about the true religion. In order to achieve this goal and avoid negative outcomes, she argues that a

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[123] Khairulnizam Mat Karim and Suzy Aziziyana Saili, "Inter-Faith Dialogue: The Qur'anic and Prophetic Perspective," *Jurnal Usuluddin* 29, June (2009), 72.

[124] See Arfah Ab Majid, "Inter-Religious Dialogue: A Threat to Aqidah or Platfform [sic.] of Da'wah?," http://www.ukm.my/rsde/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/21-inter-religious.pdf, 1.

[125] See ibid., 5.

[126] Ibid., 7.

[127] Ibid., 11.

better understanding among Malaysian Muslims of what interreligious dialogue is and how it can be properly conducted is an essential prerequisite.

2.2.2 The Christian Perspective

The foundational text for Christians, the Bible, does, because of its historical position, not mention Islam or the relationship with Muslims. This does not mean, however, that it has nothing to say about how to behave towards, live and communicate with people who are not Christians. The literature review here will concentrate on what can be learned from the biblical texts and its overall theology about dealing with people of other faith.

2.2.2.1 The place of interreligious dialogue in Christian Theology

The topic of interreligious dialogue within Christian theology is usually dealt with as one topic in two wider fields. One is labelled "Theology of Religions." Here, the question is how other religions should be seen and understood from a Christian point of view. The other is the wide field of "Mission Studies," which has as its main question how Christians relate to and witness about their faith to people of other or no religion.

Lesslie Newbigin states that real interreligious dialogue is impossible in two scenarios: The first is, when Christians believe that it does not really matter what others believe and that in "some form of universalism … everything will be all right for everybody in the end."[128] While it would of course be possible to share spiritual experiences, "nothing vital is at stake".[129] What Newbigin criticizes here is what can be seen in pluralistic models of a theology of religion.[130] Paul Knitter calls this the "Mutuality Model" and describes it as "Many True Religions Called to Dialogue".[131]

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[128] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 176.

[129] Ibid.

[130] See, for example: John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluarlistic Theology of Religions*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

[131] The idea behind it is, in broad strokes, that there is one divine reality behind all religions; that all religious experience and understanding is limited and all religions still possess true aspects of it. There is no need to convince anyone of any truth; instead, what religions are called to do is to find ethical values that unite them and then work for the good of humankind. See: Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing*

The second scenario in which interreligious dialogue is impossible according to Newbigin is when Christians believe that nothing good can be found in other religions and that the only aspect under which other religions are to be viewed is that their adherents are lost while Christians are saved. In that case, "dialogue is simply inappropriate. The person in the lifeboat and the person drowning in the sea do not have a dialogue. The one rescues the other; the time to share their experiences will come only afterward."[132]

2.2.2.2 Reasons Christians have aired against interreligious dialogue

For people who want to find biblical proof texts against Islam and interreligious dialogue, they will find them. Daniel Madigan notes:

> "Many Christian interpreters continue to read the New Testament's warnings against "false prophets" (e.g., Matthew 7: 15; 24:11, 24 and parallels; also 2 Peter 2: 1 and 1 John 4: 1) and those who "preach a different gospel" (2 Corinthians 11: 4) as referring to the Prophet of Islam, and some have seen in him the "Antichrist" spoken of in the letters of John (1 John 2: 18, 22; 4: 3; 2 John 1:7)."[133]

Apart from biblical passages, there were other hindrances. John Azumah writes that there are, what he terms, "conservative evangelicals" who, out of different reasons, are very sceptical about interreligious dialogue.[134] One fear is that the task of evangelism (i.e., calling people to turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord and Saviour) will be watered down in dialogue. They are especially concerned about a version of dialogue as described above, where one can only enter by leaving behind one's own faith convictions. They also fear a kind of syncretism, an undue mixing of religious beliefs and practices that could result from dialogue with other religions.[135]

Theologies of Religions (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). A prime example for this understanding of religions purely in light of their contribution to peace is found in: Hans Küng, *Projekt Weltethos* (München, GER: Piper, 1990).

[132] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 176.

[133] Daniel Madigan, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 245.

[134] John Azumah, "Evangelical Christian Views and Attitudes Towards Christian–Muslim Dialogue," *Transformation* 29, no. 2 (2012).

[135] Azumah also mentions other, more practical, reasons why conservative Evangelicals hesitate to enter into dialogue. For example, in dialogue with Muslims they see Christians repeatedly taking

While valid concerns exist about authentic Christian expression, contemporary dialogue often transcends a pluralistic theology of religions. Engaging in interreligious dialogue can maintain a strong Christian identity.

The reluctance of some Christians toward interreligious dialogue was heightened by their circumstances, particularly post-9/11, amid widespread anti-Muslim sentiments fueled by certain Christian pastors and churches. Biblical passages were sometimes interpreted to justify these positions.[136]

Despite the biblical references mentioned in Madigan's quote, the overall perspective of the New Testament is clear: Christians are called to love their neighbours as they love themselves (Matthew 22:39), they should love even their enemies (Luke 6:27), are called to make every effort to live in peace with everyone (Romans 12:18), and even when they consider sinful what others say or do, still love the sinning person and thus follow the example of Jesus.

2.2.2.3 Christian support for interreligious dialogue

The majority of Christian scholars, representing a range of denominations, view interreligious dialogue as a crucial aspect of Christian faith. They contend that holding Christian convictions is not a hindrance but a fundamental prerequisite for dialogue. Dialogue, so they claim, happens on the basis of one's faith and the reasons to enter into dialogue are profoundly theological. Newbigin, for example, argues that all, Christians and non-Christians alike, are part of the great story of God with this world and with humankind. Christians are to seek what glorifies God and while they do so, they will find many issues where they will be able to agree with others what should be done in this world. He believes that based on collaborative work for justice and freedom, a

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responsibility for the wrongdoings of Christians in the past (for example, for the crusades), but see a lack of a similar attitude among Muslims.

[136] See: Hussain, "Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue," 261-64. Some Christians, based on their impression of Islam as a violent religion, see no vital basis for interreligious dialogue. See, for example: Selwyn Duke, "Catholic Priest: Islam "Not a Religion of Peace"; Interfaith Dialogue Currently "Useless"," The New American (06. December 2018), https://www.thenewamerican.com/culture/faith-and-morals/item/30838-catholic-priest-islam-not-a-religion-of-peace-interfaith-dialogue-currently-useless.

dialogue will develop about the question: "What is the meaning and goal of this common human story in which we are all, Christians and others together, participants?"[137]

The Protestant historian Scott Sunquist mentions the Christian belief that all humans are created in God's image and are bestowed with divine dignity as a fundamental reason for a dialogical approach towards people of other religion.[138]

He continues and notes the example of Jesus for Christians. How he met people and conversed with them, should guide Christians in the way they meet people of other faiths: "Jesus questioned, spoke, and listened in a way that established dialogical relationships with others—peasants, those in authority, and even Gentiles."[139] The Roman Catholic scholars Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder state succinctly: "God's being and action is dialogical."[140]

The positions mentioned above are backed by official church communiques. The Roman Catholic Church was vanguard in pushing in the direction of dialogue with the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. The document *Nostra Aetate*, for example, declares: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."[141] The underlying theological idea is that God is active and present in this world, not only in and through the church. Other documents followed, for example *Dialogue and Proclamation*[142] in which interreligious dialogue is encouraged and at the same time set

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[137] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182.

[138] Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2013), 149.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 378.

[141] Pope Paul VI, "Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," Vatican (28. October 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

[142] Pontifical Council For Inter-Religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation".

in the wider perspective of the church's reaching out to other people with the message and love of Jesus Christ.

On the Protestant side, it was mainly the World Council of Churches that discussed and promoted interreligious dialogue. The impetus came especially from Asia where Christians were surrounded by other religions and very naturally had to find their place among them.[143] The relatively recent document *Together Towards Life* (Article 94) takes a strong stance for dialogue, stating: "Dialogue at the religious level is possible only if we begin with the expectation of meeting God who has preceded us and has been present with people within their own contexts. … Dialogue provides for an honest encounter where each party brings to the table all that they are in an open, patient and respectful manner."[144]

It is noteworthy that such a positive attitude does not preclude "respectful confrontation and mutual challenge"[145] when values that are important for Christians are at stake like religious freedom and human rights. Bevans and Schroeder call their approach "prophetic dialogue,"[146] pointing out that dialogue partners are not there to just condone and appreciate everything. All should openly speak from their convictions, addressing not only moral issues but also matters of faith and theology. While appreciating truth that is found in other religions, Christians are to uphold the conviction that the way to God is only found in Jesus who is "the way, the truth and the life" (Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 6).[147]

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[143] Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 149.

[144] Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes," World Council of Churches (5. September 2012), http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes.

[145] "Called to Dialogue" 16.

[146] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), ch. 12. The expression "prophetic dialogue" as used here has nothing to do with the conversations the Prophet Muhammad had with people of other faith.

[147] See ibid., 349.

2.2.3 Conclusion

In today's time as well as in history, it cannot be taken for granted that Muslims and Christians opt for dialogue instead of separation, distance or even hatred. There are Christian preachers who see in Islam the greatest evil of our days and Muslim preachers who instigate hatred against Christians. Many times both sides refer to their holy scriptures. The Bible and the Qur'an have been used (or: misused) in a way in which they created more division between the two religions. The time in history and the circumstances, denominational core convictions and personal prejudices have often influenced the hermeneutics of sacred scripture.[148]

However, the literature review reveals interpretive approaches that support interreligious dialogue without compromising core Christian or Muslim beliefs. Those promoting interreligious dialogue within their faith communities must persistently advocate for the legitimacy and viability of such interpretations.

In addition, when people speak on behalf of their faith communities, the other side would do well to take the perspective and interpretation presented to them seriously. When some Christians questioned if the Qur'an did in fact put such a high emphasis on love and mercy as some representatives of the Muslim community in the Common Word initiative said it would, the Christian scholars replied: "[A]s we would be rightfully uncomfortable with Muslims' independently interpreting our faith without reference to what we as Christians say about it, we must similarly not draw our own independent conclusions about Islam without first affording Muslims the opportunity to interpret their own faith for us."[149]

2.3 Dialogue in the Context of Malaysia

This third and final part of the literature review will deal with the context of Malaysia in two ways: It will first look for the main themes in the literature of

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[148] See: Abdulaziz Sachedina, "The Qur'an and Other Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 202. Hussain expressed very openly for Islam that "the various strands in the Qur'an can be used both as a bridge-building tool and to justify mutual exclusivism; see: "Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue," 254.

[149] Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Yarrington, *A Common Word*, 178.

interreligious dialogue in Malaysia within the past roughly ten years. The second way will serve to shortly introduce a sample of programs and initiatives that have been taken within the same timeframe and identify main players in the field of interreligious dialogue in the country. The important role of leaders for dialogue as found in the literature will be pointed out in both sections.

2.3.1 Interreligious dialogue in Malaysia in the academic literature

From a review of the academic literature about interreligious dialogue in Malaysia four main themes have emerged that authors deal with. They will be presented in turn below. There are, in addition, research papers that deal with concrete projects; these will be included in the next section (2.3.2).

Before illustrating major themes in the literature, it is important to mention what is not there: It is almost impossible to find academic contributions from Christian authors about interreligious dialogue in Malaysia. From the approximately 40 articles under consideration, only a handful was written by Christian authors.[150] The causes for this imbalance could not be figured out but would be worthwhile to be reflected on with Christian academics in the field.

2.3.1.1 Theological basis for interreligious dialogue

There are numerous publications that reiterate the foundations for interreligious dialogue from an Islamic perspective, often starting with a discussion of various verses from the Qur'an, followed by examples of the life of the Prophet Muhammad.[151] Some

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[150] Databases of the University of Malaya and Fuller Theological Seminary as well as websites like researchgate.net and academia.edu were searched for keywords in the field of Muslim-Christian dialogue, interfaith dialogue, interreligious dialogue, etc.; specified for Malaysia and the 20 years up until the writing of the literature review. Due to language competencies, mainly English literature was included in the review. This resulted in a narrowing of the scope of potential literature to be included. However, most of the writing by Christians seen in the process of the research was in English.

[151] See: Osman Bakar, *The Qur'an on Interfaith and Inter-Civilizational Dialogue: Interpreting a Divine Message for Twenty-First Century Humanity* (Kuala Lumpur, MY: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006); Shah et al., "Interfaith Dialogue: Approaches, Ethics, and Issues"; Mat Zain, Awang, and Zakaria, "Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Perspective of Malaysian Contemporary Muslim Thinkers".

authors add examples of the hadith or show how peaceful co-existence under Islamic rule looked like in history.[152]

Even if articles have a very specific and limited purpose, the authors often refer back to the foundational texts.[153] This is understandable. Islam as a way of life must be rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah and Muslims in Malaysia have a very strong identity as Muslims. Ahmad Munawar Ismail refers to a poll conducted in 2005 in which Malay Muslims were asked "which identity they would choose if they could only choose one." The result was that "73% chose Muslim, 14% chose Malaysian, and 13% chose Malay."[154] Scholars of Comparative Religions in Malaysia who want to support interreligious dialogue initiatives obviously see the need to back up what they do by referring to the fundamental Islamic texts as confirmation that interreligious dialogue is in line with the tenets of the religion.

2.3.1.2 Interreligious dialogue and civilization

A second issue that appears frequently in the Malaysian literature about interreligious dialogue is its relation to or role within civilization. Bakar[155] as well as Baharuddin et al.[156] define civilization on the basis of Qur'an and Sunnah by its three constituent elements: religion *(din)*, religious community *(ummah)*, and the city *(madinah)* to give shape and provide guidance to the concept of dialogue. Bakar emphasizes that "civilization must be God-centered".[157]

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[152] For example: Alwani Ghazali, Muhammad Kamal, and Zambrie Ibrahim @ Musa, *Peaceful Co-Existence in New Malaysia*.

[153] A good example is: Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali et al., "Storytelling as a Peace Education in Interfaith Dialogue: An Experience among Selected University Students," *Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam / Journal of Aqidah & Islamic Thought* 21 (2019). The article is about a project that was carried out for peacebuilding and the method used was storytelling. However, the authors first justify on the basis of the Qur'an that interreligious dialogue is an appropriate measure.

[154] Ahmad Munawar Ismail and Wan Kamal Mujani, "Themes and Issues in Research on Interfaith and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia," *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences* 6, no. 6 (2012).

[155] Bakar, *The Qur'an on Interfaith and Inter-Civilizational Dialogue*, 7.

[156] Azizan Baharuddin, Raihanah Abdullah, and Chang Lee Wei, "Dialogue of Civilisation: An Islamic Perspective," *Journal of Dharma* 34, no. 3 (2009), 305.

[157] Gunn offers an alternative definition, albeit not based on Islamic sources and sees the term civilisation ideally "used in a neutral sense, to refer to a relatively long-lasting society or tradition that shares common cultural features." Alastair S. Gunn, "Introduction," in *Dialogue of Civilisations and the Construction of Peace*, ed. Thomas W. Simon and Azizan Baharuddin (Kuala Lumpur, MY: Centre for

The real issue at stake is the role of religion within the state or within society and the discussion reflects the two foundational principles of the constitution regarding religion, namely that Islam is the religion of the federation and that other religions should be able to exercise their faith. Hunt reflects (from a Christian perspective) on how some vocal Muslim groups reject interreligious dialogue in fear of losing the dominating religious position of Islam in the country "by putting Muslim interests at the same level as those of other religious communities."[158]

Connected with this question is how one should understand the fact that there is a plurality of religions present. Marina Munira Abdul Mutalib and Mashitah Sulaiman rightly state: "Some scholars have been using the term 'religious pluralism' interchangeably to indicate a mere plurality of religions while some might use it to indicate a philosophical values [sic] that advocate equality of religious truth."[159] The lacking sharpness in how the word pluralism is used often hinders coming to the core of the discussion. Authors frequently point out that the plurality of cultures and religions is willed by God. However, they are also very clear to oppose a vision in which all religions are equally valid in a sense that they should have their rightful say in shaping society, and, even less, that they are equally valid expressions of truth.[160]

Muslims expect that Islam and the application of its teachings for Muslims are not questioned in the dialogue process. What Alwani Ghazali et al. write aptly represents the notion of many other articles for the current time: "The position of Islam as the official religion of Malaysia should be respected despite the elation in freedom of expression in this climate of New Malaysia."[161] In many instances, this should not be a

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Civilisational Dialogue, 2008), vii. See also the contribution of Carl W. Ernst in the same book on the various uses of the term.

[158] Robert Hunt, "Can Muslims Engage in Interreligious Dialogue? A Study of Malay Muslim Identity in Contemporary Malaysia," *The Muslim World* 99, no. 4 (2009), 591.

[159] Marina Munira Abdul Mutalib and Mashitah Sulaiman, "Understanding Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: A Christian and Muslim Debate," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7, Special Issue (2017), 180-81.

[160] If understood rightly, even to level the field and allow different religions to openly present their truth claims seems to be a step too far for most authors as this could be seen as questioning the elevated status of Islam in Malaysia.

[161] Alwani Ghazali, Muhammad Kamal, and Zambrie Ibrahim @ Musa, *Peaceful Co-Existence in New Malaysia*.

reason for debate. However, irritations sometimes arise in cases when Islamic teachings stand in tension with other perspectives; for example, when people argue on the basis of liberal or humanistic values that the right of religious freedom should include the right to choose one's own religion. Most Muslims in Malaysia would argue that Islamic teachings as non-negotiables trump these other perspectives.[162]

There are concerns among some Muslim leaders and parts of the Muslim population that interreligious dialogue could lead in a wrong direction and that it therefore must be kept within permissible bounds.[163] Walters, a Christian author, states the hopes he puts in dialogue: "One of the main objectives of dialogue should be the common search for a viable model of society and cooperation in building a truly human community that in law and practice guarantees equality for all, safeguards religious liberties and respects differences and particularities."[164] With this, he hopes for more than most Muslim scholars who write about dialogue seem willing to accept as an outcome. Based on the positions of the Muslim authors outlined above, it is doubtful that a *dialogue about the purpose of dialogue* will be likely to take place in the foreseeable future and that those initiatives that focus on strengthening relationships within interreligious communities, living peacefully with each other and cooperating for the good of society on a small scale will have a greater chance to be accepted and produce successful outcomes. Maybe it is for this reason that a good number of publications put an emphasis on dialogue of life which will be the topic for the next sub-section.

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[162] Cf. Matti Justus Schindehütte, "Konversion und Religionsrecht in Malaysia und Indonesien", in: Religiöse Grenzüberschreitungen: Studien Zu Bekehrung, Konfessions- und Religionswechsel = Crossing Religious Borders: Studies on Conversion and Religious Belonging, edited by Christine Lienemann-Perrin and Wolfgang Lienemann. Studies in the History of Christianity in the Non-Western World (Asia, Africa, Latin America), 763-95. Wiesbaden, GER: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012, 771-773.

[163] See, for example, the reference to the Interfaith Commission that did not come into existence (below, section 2.3.2).

[164] Walters, "Issues in Christian–Muslim Relations", 80.

2.3.1.3 Dialogue of life

Suraya Sintang et al. define dialogue of life in a succinct and yet comprehensive way:

"Dialogue of life is a form of inter-religious dialogue which commonly takes place at any place and any time. It is a dialogical relation to promote amicable relation with people from different religions. It begins when one encounters, lives and interacts with the others and participates in daily life activities together. It is a social interaction which shows the involvement of non-elite participants in the inter-religious dialogue at the grass roots level."[165]

They point out the need for dialogue of life to take place because of the challenges the plurality of religions and cultures presents to the cohesion of the society of Malaysia. They see it as an opportunity "to break cultural biases and prejudices"[166] among a diverse population. Sometimes, dialogue of life is seen as having contributed to conversion or as having reduced possible tensions after people became Muslims.[167]

Some literature suggests that while Malaysia has a history of religious harmony and peaceful coexistence, the current trajectory appears less optimistic. One article takes up changes revealed through surveys conducted in 2006 and in 2011. While in 2006, 64% of the people who were asked felt that people in the country were getting closer together, this percentage fell to 36% in 2011.[168] Newer studies tend to point in the same direction: Although there is a general amiable attitude towards others, "attitudes and perceptions of race and religion impact on inter-group relations, and the signs are potentially divisive."[169] On the other hand, when people have relationships or even friendships with those of other groups, their sentiments towards that group becomes more positive.[170]

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[165] Suraya Sintang, Azizan Baharuddin, and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, "Dialogue of Life and Its Significance in Inter-Religious Relation in Malaysia," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 2, no. Dec. (2012), 69.

[166] Ibid., 73.

[167] Azarudin Awang and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, "The Correlation 'Dialogue of Life' and Process of Conversion: A Study within Chinese Converts," *Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research* 4, no. 1 (2014); Suraya Sintang, Azizan Baharuddin, and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, "Dialogue of Life and Its Significance in Inter-Religious Relation in Malaysia".

[168] See: Wan Sabri Wan Yusof and Arfah Ab Majid, "Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia: Past Experience, Present Scenario and Future Challenges", 45.

[169] Aun, "Fault Lines – and Common Ground – in Malaysia's Ethnic Relations and Policies", 2.

[170] The emphasis here was on ethnic groups, but it is likely to apply to religious groups as well.

Abdul Mutalib and Sulaiman mention that activities that in the past brought people of different background together, like shared celebrations *(kongsi raya)* and open houses *(rumah terbuka)* are in decline; partially because Muslim scholars have discouraged them.[171] Petricia Martinez, a Malaysian Catholic, makes the same observation, but states the cause differently. She writes that there are important laws and regulations in Malaysia to ensure harmony. They rule that all engagement across religious and ethnic lines have to be done in a "sensitive, sensible, and sane" manner. Noting the importance of these regulations, she nevertheless sees them as the cause for less dialogue of life: "Unfortunately, one outcome is that the constant warnings against inciting racial and religious violence have driven many Malaysians to retreat from 'dialogue', let alone 'engagement' about religion (and race)."[172] She argues for a climate and an attitude that is less fearful and also open enough to speak about differences; even in regard to religion. The religious should not be excluded in day-to-day conversation, nor should it be left to leaders or experts alone.

Social media opened new pathways for people of different religions to share their lives. However, social media in the realm of religion and dialogue also entails dangers. John Borelli of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs is right when he points out that there is a lot of hate disseminated through social media platforms. Social media posts and short entries are also prone to misunderstandings. However, there are also opportunities. He writes: "If you have existing relationships with people, new social media can serve as an auxiliary communication tool to help you maintain contact with them."[173] While social media is shaping the lives of (especially

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[171] See: Abdul Mutalib and Sulaiman, "Understanding Religious Pluralism in Malaysia", 177. In their analysis, they refer to Yeoh, 2013, but do not provide the full reference.

[172] Patricia Anne Martinez, "A Case-Study of Malaysia: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Partnership, Possibilities and Problems, with Suggestions for the Future," in *Dialogue of Civilisations and the Construction of Peace*, ed. Thomas W. Simon and Azizan Baharuddin (Kuala Lumpur, MY: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, 2008), 116.

[173] Borelli, John, "A Discussion with Dr. John Borelli, Georgetown University Special Assistant to the President for Interreligious Initiatives, on New Social Media and Interreligious Understanding" Georgetown University, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs (5. February 2010), https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-dr-john-borelli-georgetown-university-special-assistant-to-the-president-for-interreligious-initiatives-on-new-social-media-and-interreligious-understanding.

young) people around the world, its impact on dialogue, especially on the dialogue of life in Malaysia, has yet to be explored academically.

To summarize: While dialogue of life is emphasized by many authors, few acknowledge the growing distance between ethnic and religious groups, and even fewer propose solutions. Religious leaders are crucial in shaping dialogue's direction in Malaysia, a focus of the next subsection on literature concerning dialogue and leadership.

2.3.1.4 Dialogue and Leadership

Various scholars in Malaysia have emphasized the important contribution leaders in different areas of society can make in moving dialogue forward. Osman Bakar sees it as the role of "Muslim political leaders and educationists"[174] to move from dialogue within the *ummah* to include other People of the Book

A team of researchers[175] has carried out research on religious leadership and dialogue and published a number of articles on it; mainly between 2012 and 2016.[176] As the topics of the articles overlap significantly and the findings are consistent, only a synthesis of the main conclusions they drew will be presented here.

First, proper dialogue needs proper leadership. Religious leaders play a major role whether interreligious dialogue takes place at all and, if so, whether it is successful or not. The question of who can represent a religious community is of utmost

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[174] Osman Bakar, "Interfaith Dialogue as a New Approach in Islamic Education " *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1, no. 4 (2010), 703.

[175] They are Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Suzy Aziziyana Saili, and for partly Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali.

[176] Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, and Suzy Aziziyana Saili, "An Ideal Concept of Ketua Agama, Religious Leader and Az-Zaʿīm Ad-Dīnī: A Preliminary Linguistic Analysis," *International Journal of Education and Research* 1, no. 10 (2013); Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, and Suzy Aziziyana Saili, "Religious Leader (Islam & Christianity) Understanding of Inter-Faith Dialogue Basic Concept in Malaysia and Its Effect to Social Relations," ibid.2, no. 3 (2014); Khairulnizam Mat Karim and Suzy Aziziyana Saili, "Measuring Religious Leaders (Muslim-Non-Muslim) Understanding on Interfaith Dialogue Basic Concept and Its Effects to Social Relation: A Preliminary"; "Role of Religious Leader in Interfaith Dialoge Towards Conflict Resolution: A Muslim Analysis on Christianity's Perspective," (2015); Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Suzy Aziziyana Saili, and Hambali, "Role of Religious Leader in Interfaith Dialogue Towards Conflict Resolution: An Islamic Perspective"; "Pemimpin Agama: Model Ejen Pelaksana Dialog Antara Agama Di Malaysia (Religious Leader: Model Agent for Inter-Faith Dialogue Implementation in Malaysia)," *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah* 6, no. 1 (2016).

importance. The higher one stands in the hierarchy, the greater the responsibility and the influence that person has on how interreligious dialogue will develop.[177]

Second, leaders need to bring personal qualities to the task of interreligious dialogue. They must be knowledgeable, have vast experience, must be of good character and able to build good relationships. It is mentioned frequently that high ranking religious leaders have responsibilities and opportunities to act in situations of conflict. Especially in this capacity, the abovementioned character traits are indispensable.

Third, two studies have shown that the more religious leaders know about interreligious dialogue, the more likely is it that they have good relations with people of another religion.

Fourth, both, to fulfil their own roles in interreligious dialogue and to act as examples for those they lead, leaders must themselves actively build good relationships with non-Muslims,[178] interact with them and be actually involved in dialogue.

Fifth, religious leaders have the responsibility to educate their followers about interreligious dialogue and especially highlight the need to build good relationships with adherents of other religions.

Sixth, religious leaders also have a responsibility to safeguard the faith and make sure they and their believers do not overstep marks that are incompatible with Islam; especially that they do not slide into relativism or syncretism.

2.3.2 Interreligious dialogue initiatives in Malaysia

This section serves to highlight some initiatives of interreligious dialogue that have taken place in Malaysia in recent years and to introduce institutions that have made interreligious and inter-civilizational dialogue part of their agenda.

Before doing so, note should be taken of what is not present or underdeveloped in Malaysia. In 2005 the then Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, called for greater

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[177] This is obvious: A local Imam will be encouraged to engage in dialogue only if higher ranking Muslim leaders encourage instead of discourage it.

[178] In this section, the Muslim situation was in view; some other parts referred also to Christian or non-Muslim religious leaders in general.

understanding among adherents of different religions. The plan was to establish an Interfaith Commission, but opposition rose quickly, especially from some Muslim groups who feared that the constitutionally guaranteed position of Islam could be weakened.[179] Instead, a Committee to Promote Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Adherents (JKMPKA)[180] was formed in 2010 and integrated in the Department of National Unity under the Prime Minister's Department. Recently, calls for the establishment of an Interfaith Commission have been raised again.[181]

In addition to this, the review of initiatives has revealed a general hesitancy to engage in dialogue that touches religious and theological questions.[182] The statement made by Joshua Woo Sze Zeng, who has been part of Cambridge University's Inter-Faith Programme, can serve as an example. After a gathering of Muslim and Christian leaders in 2017, he remarked that "there was a serious lack of in-depth engagement on the actual interfaith challenges in our society."[183] Sivin Kit of the Malaysia Theological Seminary (STM)[184] mentions that "Interfaith dialogue often is stereotyped as just talking nice about religion."[185] He argues for a more open dialogue that touches the real issues faced by people and communities of different religions, but at the same time notices "the reality of low religious literacy" that often hinders deep conversations.

The initiatives that are taking place will be grouped into four rubrics according to who initiated them: centres or institutions for dialogue, universities, religious practitioners, and common people.

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[179] See: Hunt, "Can Muslims Engage in Interreligious Dialogue?", 591-92.

[180] Jawatankuasa Mempromosikan Persefahaman Dan Keharmonian Antara Penganut Agama; see: https://www.perpaduan.gov.my/ms/jawatankuasa-mempromosikan-persefahaman-dan-keharmonian-antara-penganut-agama-jkmpka.

[181] See, for examle: Kasthuri Patto, "Revisit the Parliamentary Interfaith Commission to Foster Interfaith Dialogue," malaysiakini (29. May 2019), https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/477889.

[182] This is in line with the observations made by Petricia Martinez and stated above, section 4.1.3.

[183] Sheith Khidhir Bin Abu Bakar, "Address Real Issues in Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Leaders Told," Free Malaysia Today (04. July 2017), https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/07/04/address-real-issues-in-interfaith-dialogue-religious-leaders-told/.

[184] Seminari Theoloji Malaysia; https://stm.edu.my.

[185] Sheith Khidhir Bin Abu Bakar, "Address Real Issues in Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Leaders Told".

2.3.2.1 Centres/Institutions that promote dialogue

There are a number of centres or institutions that promote dialogue within Malaysia.[186] First to be mentioned is the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC)[187] which is part of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and has a unit for Comparative Religion and Intercultural Dialogue. ISTAC offers a range of programs. For example, in February 2019 the International Seminar on Contemporary Islamic Thought and Societal Reforms[188] took place with presentations and discussions about the role of Islam in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

A second example is the work of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM).[189] As a government organization, the Institute also offers workshops as the one described by Azizan Baharuddin. She writes how they brought young Malaysians of different races and religions together in a *kampong*, where they worked together in the rice fields and simply shared life, which "inevitably resulted in mutual care, mutual respect, [and] mutual appreciation."[190] IKIM also offers seminars on interreligious dialogue.[191]

A third example is the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (CCD),[192] based at the University of Malaya (UM). CCD issues two journals (KATHA and Jurnal Peradaban) pertaining to the topic of dialogue. Like the other institutions mentioned before, CCD also offers seminars and workshops. One such workshop "brought together 80 religious leaders and representatives from various faith traditions to discuss legal issues and religious understanding in this country."[193]

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[186] Only a selection of them and only few examples of what they do can be presented here.

[187] International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC); http://www.iium.edu.my/institute/istac.

[188] International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) ; http://iium.edu.my/media/32636/prog%20060219.pdf.

[189] Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia; http://www.ikim.gov.my/.

[190] Azizan binti Baharuddin, "Dialogue Should Start Early," in *Religion, Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence*, ed. Azizan binti Baharuddin and Enizahura Abdul Aziz (Kuala Lumpur, MY: Institute for Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), 2018).

[191] See, for example, the seminar in September 2018 under the title: Dialog antara Penganut Agama; http://www.ikim.gov.my/new-wp/index.php/2018/08/13/4-5-ogos-2018-kursus-panduan-dialog-antara-penganut-agama/.

[192] Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (CCD); https://dialogue.um.edu.my/.

[193] Wan Sabri Wan Yusof and Arfah Ab Majid, "Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia: Past Experience, Present Scenario and Future Challenges", 48.

The Archdiocesan Ministry of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs (AMEIA) is the official arm of the Catholic Church in Malaysia "responsible for building bridges and promoting dialogue with other religious traditions, churches and ecclesial communities."[194] Together with the Catholics At Home Podcast it conducted a podcast series on world religions in the second half of 2021.[195] In conversations with representatives of other religions, the different beliefs and practices were introduced and questions pertaining the religions discussed.

The Centre for Religion and Society[196] at the Malaysia Theological Seminary serves as another example for a Christian organization seeking to further interreligious dialogue. There have been numerous public forums where Muslim scholars were invited for presentation of their topic and subsequent discussion. The Centre was also involved in what will be described in the following sub-section.

2.3.2.2 University-based dialogue initiatives in conjunction with research

Interreligious dialogue among students has sometimes been initiated by university lecturers. Khadijah et al. describe how they took a group of students from different universities to the Malaysia Theological Seminary for a full day of exposure to the Christian environment and dialogue sessions with Christian students there. Storytelling was used as the method for students to discuss themselves, their interactions with "the other," and their aspirations for Malaysia as a multicultural society. [197] Some found it difficult to share personal experiences and beliefs with those of different faiths, but ultimately valued the experience. The authors are convinced "that the storytellers experienced acceptance, understanding, and support,"[198] that their worldview was widened and that their image of "the other" was transformed in a way that they would like to live in happiness, harmony and peace with people of other faith.

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[194] Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur; https://www.archkl.org/index.php/apostolate-2/149-ameia.

[195] Apple Podcasts; https://podcasts.apple.com/at/podcast/catholics-at-home/id1506856164. Interestingly, no episode on Islam was found in the list of the series online.

[196] https://www.facebook.com/religionsocietymalaysia/.

[197] Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali et al., "Storytelling as a Peace Education in Interfaith Dialogue: An Experience among Selected University Students", 128.

[198] Ibid., 130.

In another initiative, a course in the religious studies program was used at four different universities to bring students of different faith together to let them experience a variety of ways of meeting the "religious other." [199] Among the activities were circle conversations, storytelling, a courtesy visit to a religious leader, field experiences, and interfaith workshops. The authors noted several positive outcomes: improved communication skills, meaningful dialogue opportunities through field experiences, and increased mutual appreciation among students of different faiths. Importantly, the experience strengthened rather than diminished participants' faith identities. [200]

2.3.2.3 Dialogue among clerics

For approximately five years, the Muslim Global Unity Network (Unity) has invited imams and pastors, along with other religious leaders, to an *iftar* dinner while the organization named Christians for Peace and Harmony in Malaysia (CPHM) reciprocated and hosted an annual Christmas dinner. [201] The main purpose for these gatherings is to work for greater unity of religious groups for the good of society and to foster growing personal relationships between religious leaders.

At the CPHM & Friends Christmas Dinner 2019, [202] representatives of both organizations delivered key note addresses. There was also a quiz that contained questions of both religions. The atmosphere was marked by mutual respect. These gatherings aim to strengthen relationships and break down barriers. Participants noted that over time, their hesitancy to engage with those of other faiths decreased, and they became more comfortable discussing matters of faith with each other.

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[199] Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali et al., "Inter-Religious Dialogue Activity: An Experience among Undergraduate Students in Selected Universities in Malaysia," *Akademika: Journal of Southeast Asia Social Sciences and Humanities* 89, no. 1 (2019).

[200] Ibid., 79.

[201] Dzulkifly, "In True Ramadan Spirit, Muslims and Christians Break Fast Together".

[202] The author was present; the gathering took place on 12.12.2019 at the Hotel Royale Chulan Damansara.

2.3.2.4 Initiatives taken by common people

Not all interreligious dialogue projects are initiated by huge organizations. Uthaya Sankar grew up in contact with various religious communities but sensed a growing segregation in Malaysia as he grew older. In an attempt to raise better understanding of others' faiths, he started to organize interfaith tours through Kuala Lumpur[203] in association with a group called Projek Dialog.[204] With a group of religiously diverse people, he visited temples, churches and mosques. This experience was often the first time participants had visited holy sites outside their own tradition, offering valuable opportunities to learn more about other religions practiced in Malaysia.

Another example of private citizens who took the initiative for interfaith dialogue can be seen in the programs that were initiated and led by two women, Patricia Nunis, a Christian, and her colleague, Dr Hamidah Marican, a Muslim.[205] They have conducted a number of different "Building Bridges" initiatives. Among them was a "Diversity & Inclusion Youth Camp" conducted with university students, which they ran annually from 2012-2017. The Sultanah Raja Zarith, wife of the Sultan of Johor, had taken over patronage for a dialogue program. Having the backup of a person in high position and held in high esteem helped them to run the programs successfully.

2.3.3 Conclusion

After reviewing academic writings and various dialogue initiatives in Malaysia, the initial assumption – that leaders have a crucial role for successful dialogue – has been confirmed: they develop and lead programs for students to meet with members of other religions. Organizations, led by scholars, bring people together for workshops and seminars. Sometimes leaders offer their patronage and provide a framework in which dialogue programs can take place in an official, secure and orderly manner. Leaders will determine whether and how dialogue will develop.

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[203] Jennifer Pak, "The Man Behind Malaysia's Interfaith Tours," BBC News (22. October 2013), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24583935.

[204] Projek Dialog; http://www.projekdialog.com/.

[205] Personal communication with Ms. Patricia Nunis on 19th of March, 2021 by e-mail.

Based on this review, the place of this study can now be shown clearly: it builds on previous research projects in the field of interreligious dialogue; some focused on leaders, others on students and some were based on a comparison between Muslim and Christian perceptions of dialogue. At the same time, this research project goes beyond what has already been done in at least two aspects: First, no research had investigated Muslim and Christian students of their religion taking the perspective that they will be leaders of others in the field of religious communities or in academia in the future. Second, there is no other research that was conducted in a comparative way where the prospects for dialogue in the view of these potential future influencers can be laid side by side and compared for obstacles and overlaps. This research, then, by employing quantitative as well as qualitative methods, helps to see more clearly the opportunities for these future leaders to contribute to Muslim-Christian dialogue should they wish to engage in it.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In regard to the methodology of this research, three aspects are of importance: The selection of research participants, data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Selection of Research Participants

This research was carried out among Muslim and Christian students who are studying their own religion. The 16 Muslim students are studying at the faculties of Islamic Studies of their respective university. The 14 Christian students all studied at Christian seminaries in Malaysia with the exception of three students who study at seminaries/universities overseas (one lives in Malaysia, but studies, mainly online, in the United States; two grew up, have worked and plan to be working in Malaysia, but study in India). They were all in Malaysia at the time of the interview.[206]

3.1.1 Criteria for the selection of students

The students had to fulfil three criteria to be included in the research. First, only students who had lived a prolonged time (more than five years) in Peninsular Malaysia before they took up their studies could participate. Setting this requirement aimed towards including students in the study who have lived here long enough to be knowledgeable about the social-religious and cultural environment of the region for which this study was designed. Most of the students were Malaysians and had lived in Malaysia for all or almost all their life.[207] Those who participated therefore were in a position to contribute meaningfully to the topic under discussion.

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[206] This includes the two students who study in India; they were back in Malaysia for their semester break.

[207] One student came to Malaysia with her family when she was nine years old, another student moved to Malaysia more than twelve years ago and one student originates from East Malaysia but had lived in Peninsular Malaysia for a total of roughly seven years at the time of the interview.

The second criterion was that students study their own religion in a Master or doctoral program at the time of the interview or had graduated from such a program within less than a year.[208] The rationale behind this decision was that such students would be more likely to hold influential roles in their faith communities; especially in regard to teaching and guiding others either in the realm of academia or on the level of local faith communities. While people with less than a Master degree often play an important role in local churches or as leaders in mosques, usually at least a Master degree is compulsory to be involved in teaching others on the academic level. In order to have students involved in the study who in the future are likely to find themselves in roles of influence in either their local faith communities or in the academic world or both, it made sense to only include students who have taken a step beyond undergraduate studies. There are two more benefits in this selection: with a growing level of academic learning, the level of reflection can be expected to rise. Students in advanced programmes are in average older than undergraduate students and thus have more life experience. It is more likely that during their studies they have come across points where their reflection about dealing with people of other religions was encouraged or where their opinions went through formative processes. Lastly, as the research was conducted in English, the expectation was that students who had matured further in their studies would be more likely to speak English to a level that communication was possible. This, then, the ability to speak in English, was the third criterion for the selection of research participants.[209]

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[208] Conducting the interviews spread over several months. The concession to include students who had recently graduated ensured no one had to be eliminated from the sample just because he/she had graduated in the meantime. In addition, students were asked if they could recommend other interview partners and sometimes referred to their newly graduated colleagues. To include them made it possible to have a sample large enough to achieve saturation which otherwise would have been difficult.

[209] This has implications for the transferability of the results of the study. One could question if students who do not speak English (but only Malay for Muslims and Chinese or Tamil for Christians) have the same perspective on the research topic. While language itself would probably not be a huge denominator, it is possible that not being able to speak English could be connected to a background in a certain cultural milieu that has also had an impact on people's upbringing, education and attitudes in general.

3.1.2 Sampling and getting access to students

The selection of research participants was mainly based on convenience and accessibility while at the same time striving for diversity. The Muslim students came from four different Universities (UM, IIUM, UKM, USIM) and a number of different departments in the Islamic Studies faculties. The attempt was made to choose students from those departments closer at the centre of the study of religion; meaning rather including students who major in *fiqh* or in *aqidah* or *da'wah* than those in Islamic astronomy or banking.

Christian students also came from at least[210] four different seminaries, but the diversity is better reflected by stating that the denominations they come from are members of different Christian umbrella organization in Malaysia, namely the Roman Catholic Church, the Council of Churches of Malaysia that represents the mainline Protestant churches, and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship which represents Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches. Together they form the Christian Federation of Malaysia.

While some leaders in the Christian denominations and seminaries were very supportive of the research and readily cooperated, others raised concerns, asked not to involve their students or did not respond to repeated advances. As researchers' highest ethical commitment must be to protect those who are being researched[211] – this includes not only individuals, but also organizations – the decision has been made not to name the Christian denominations or seminaries of research participants in this dissertation. Without this concession, it would have been difficult to receive the consent of some students to participate.

Contact to students came through various means. Some were fellow students at UM. For some students at IIUM contacts were obtained through a former lecturer there; for students at UKM the administration was asked to establish contact and for the two

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[210] Two Christian students did not want to say where they study. One is the student studying mainly online in the United States, the other is a recent graduate from a Theological Seminary accredited by the Asian Theological Association.

[211] Earl Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research*, 6th, International ed. (n.p.: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2014), 433.

students at USIM a friend helped to identify potential candidates. For the Christian seminaries a leader of the seminary or the denomination was asked to agree for the students to be interviewed and to help in the selection process. They also helped to select potential candidates for the interviews. After interviewing students the interviewees were sometimes asked if they could recommend another student who could be interviewed. While this aspect of the sampling procedure might look like a snowball sampling technique,[212] it does not perfectly fit its description.

While the sample is not a probability sample either, it nonetheless includes students from various training institutions with their own outlook and, for the Christian students, also represents Christians from different denominations in Malaysia and thus enhances the diversity within the sample. The rationale behind choosing students from a number of different institutions was to include a greater variety in the sample and thus to have a sample that better represents Muslim and Christian students who study their religion. This is preferable over examining students from only one university or seminary. In addition, in the selection process, an attempt was made to include male and female students.

Because these two aspects (different training institutions, male and female students) provided guidance in the selection of research participants beyond the criteria set out above, it is best to describe the method used as a nonprobability, but purposive sampling.[213] It proved challenging to find many female Christian students who made themselves available for an interview. A fair distribution between age and students in Master/doctoral courses were not guiding aspects. That the Christian students were on average much older than the Muslim students is mainly due to the very popular Master in Divinity programme which many students take part-time after they had studied something else and often worked for a couple of years. These students typically do not come directly from undergraduate studies but have accumulated life experiences and theological training, formal or informal, before starting the Master of Divinity program.

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[212] Ibid., 200-01.
[213] Ibid., 200.

This program prepares them for part-time or full-time ministry, often within a local congregation.

The following table shows the distribution of Muslim and Christian students who participated in the research according to gender, age and program:

Table 3.1: Research participants (religion, gender, age, program)

		Muslim		Christian	
		Quantity	Percentage	Quantity	Percentage
Gender	Male	10	62.5%	10	71.4%
	Female	6	37.5%	4	28.6%
Age	21-25	8	50.0%	0	0.0%
	26-30	0	0.0%	3	21.4%
	31-35	6	37.5%	1	7.1%
	36+	2	12.5%	10	71.4%
Program	Master	12	75.0%	13	92.9%
	Doctoral	4	25.0%	1	7.1%

The overall approach of this research was inductive in nature.[214] In inductive studies, the norm is that the research should continue until saturation occurs.[215] This is also the point where reliability[216] is established. While personal experiences varied from person to person, nothing substantially new was added to the topic towards the end of the 16 interviews with the Muslim and 14 interviews with the Christian students. Rather from a standpoint of presentation than from saturation, it would have been neat to have an equal number of students on each side for easy comparison. Unfortunately, interviews with students from an additional Christian seminary contacted did not eventuate because of the special circumstances during the Corona crisis. As saturation had already been achieved, the data collection was of closed.

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[214] On more on the nature of the study, including the deductive aspects, see section 3.2.3.

[215] H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 6th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 22.

[216] See ibid., 42, for the concept of reliability.

3.2 Data Collection

In total, 30 interviews were conducted that were used for this research project. The interviews were planned to take roughly one hour each.[217] In what follows, the methodology of the data collection will be reflected on critically.

3.2.1 Mixed methods research

When this research was first designed, the idea was to conduct semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews combine two helpful features: they have a clear outline that ensures that the data needed to answer the research questions is actually gathered. At the same time they are flexible and open enough to provide some rich data. Kvale describes qualitative research methods as endeavours "to unpick how people construct the world around them, what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms that are meaningful and that offer rich insight."[218] The research was not driven by hypotheses that were to be tested, but by broader categories, represented in the research questions. Interviewees should be able to express their views, provide background information, tell stories, share experiences, concerns and hopes.

As research design grew deeper, it became clear that to start the interviews with a short questionnaire made sense. It only contained closed-ended questions and simple scales to extract information about factual data ("Have you been inside a mosque/church at some point in your life?) as well as subjective data ("How much are you interested in working together with Muslims/Christians in social projects?").

Including this questionnaire in the form of a face to face interview[219] had three positive effects: First, it allowed for a faster collection of some data than would have been possible in semi-structured interviews; second, it provided some objectively measureable data; and third, it enabled the triangulation[220] of the collected data.

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[217] For more details, see Section 3.2.4 below.

[218] Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, pos. 136.

[219] Bernard, Research Methods, 198. See Section 3.2.4 for more details.

[220] Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research*, 121. Mixed method research and triangulation needs to be distinguished. While the first serves to gather data in different ways, the second is designed to check data gathered with one method by using another method. The emphasis in this study was on the first aspect. However, in some cases the questions in the questionnaire and the interview referred to the same matter. In this case, the triangulation aspects came into play.

Bernard advises researchers that the methods chosen need to serve the respective research project when he writes: "there is never a need to choose between qualitative and quantitative data. … a sensible mix of methods—methods that match the needs of the research—is what you're after."[221]

In effect, the study became a mixed methods study which uses the benefits of both elements. Kahwati and Kane describe the type of mixed method approach employed here as "convergent design" (as both quantitative and qualitative methods were used concurrently) with an "embedded integration" (as the semi-structured interviews remained the primary method and the questionnaire was built around it).[222]

3.2.2 Structure of the inquiry and types of questions asked

The definition of dialogue used in this research was provided for those participating; it was not an area of inquiry. Having chosen a very wide definition of dialogue, it gave room to research participants to express their views on the different aspects of the such defined concept. Using this approach was necessary to have the same starting point for all interviews and to ensure the same areas were covered in the course of the conversation.

Both, the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview lead participants through a series of questions that were designed in a way that the responses provided answers to the research questions. In general, the order of questions in both instruments followed the order of the research questions,[223] starting with (1) personal experiences, the (2) question of necessity and potential benefits was covered next, followed by (3) questions concerning hindrances they perceived for dialogue to take place and to be

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[221] Bernard, *Research Methods*, 231.

[222] Leila C. Kahwati and Heather L. Kane, *Qualitative Comparative Analysis in Mixed Methods Research and Evaluation*, Sage Mixed Methods Research Series (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 19-21.

[223] An exception would, for example, be Question 13 in the questionnaire which asked whether only leaders should be involved in dialogue and thus aimed at eliciting students' views as to whether they see a place for common believers in the dialogue with others. To ask this question at this point made sense as the following questions inquired into their perceived interest and engagement of common people and leaders in dialogue. In addition, the question format of question 13 fit neatly to the surrounding questions. For advice on packaging questions with similar format, see Bernard, *Research Methods*, 213.

fruitful. The inquiry then shifted to (4) their own interest in partaking in dialogue and (5) how they, as potential leaders in their faith communities, would encourage others to participate in it.

This same structure will also be used in the presentation of the data in Chapter 4 of this dissertation and therefore does not need more elaboration here. In addition, the research instruments can be found in Appendices A (questionnaire) and B (interview guide).

Some questions were the same for both Muslim and Christian students, e.g. when both were asked how much they agreed or disagreed to the statement in question 11 of the questionnaire: "Mosques/Muslim congregations should have events where they invite people of other faith, including Christians, to come and learn more about Islam." The following question asked the same for Churches/Christian congregations. Both Muslim and Christian students were asked to answer both questions. The order of the questions was reversed for the Christian students. What was question 11 for the Muslim students was question 12 for the Christian students so that each one answered the question concerning his or her own faith community first. Also, the word order was changed in some questions. For example, in question 26 Muslim students were asked to indicate their interest in "Going on a weekend camp with Muslim and Christian students; sharing life" while for Christian students the question was "Going on a weekend camp with Christian and Muslim students; sharing life." The practice to name the own religion first was also applied in the interviews so that students would be guided from what is more familiar to them to what is less familiar to them.

This different structure for Muslim and Christian students respectively might seem unnecessarily confusing at first glance, but was necessary to enhance validity. Floyd Fowler warns: "Distributions can be compared only when the stimulus situation is the same. Small changes in wording, changing the number of alternatives offered, and even changing the position of a question in a questionnaire can make a major difference in how people answer."[224] Having two sets of students, the order of the questions must

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[224] Floyd J. Fowler, *Survey Research Methods* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2014), 97.

therefore be the same, not in an absolute sense, but relative to the perspective of the students (namely, their own religious community first). For the presentation in this dissertation, the order of questions used for the interviews with Muslims will be followed for clarity purposes.[225]

While some questions were the same for both students, others were different for Muslim and Christian students. While Muslim students were asked in question 2 how much of the Bible they had read, Christian students were asked how much of the Qur'an they had read. The attempt was to find the closest possible equivalent of the main characteristic in the question. In a vignette used in the interview, Muslim students were asked to put themselves in the following scenario: "Imagine you have completed your studies and you are a lecturer at the university. A Christian scholar happens to live on the other side of the street. He[226] knocks at your door, introduces himself and asks if you would be interested to meet once in a while to read the Bible and the Qur'an together, just to learn more and understand more about the other religion. How would you respond?" For Christians, it would be the Muslim neighbour who is a scholar and approaches him. For those who planned to serve a local congregation, the person could also be an imam of a local mosque or a pastor of a local church; in any case, someone was chosen who had previously been described as a "leader" in the other religion.[227]

When the decision was made to use both, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, all closed-ended questions became part of the questionnaire. The semi-structured interview consisted mostly of open-ended questions.[228] Bernard notes that whereas there is no rule not to include other than closed-ended questions in the questionnaire, it is still widespread practice among researchers because of their

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[225] Both sets of questionnaires can be found in Appendix 3 and 4 respectively.

[226] If the student was female, the Christian scholar would also be female.

[227] As a side remark, it should be noted that this question, like some others, was designed to elicit statements in regard to various research questions. While the main focus was on the student's own interest in dialogue, it also opened again the question whether talking about religion was useful at all and it provided an opportunity that students might talk about what they perceive as hindrances. Whereas the order of questions outlined above was stringent, the multifaceted possible answers were taken into account in the coding of the interviews and the analysis in general.

[228] Guidance for the selection of questions and the construction of the interview guide was taken from Kvale, *Doing Interviews*. As the questions will be discussed in detail in the presentation of the data in chapter four, there is no need to discuss the types of questions in detail here.

efficiency.[229] Having had the opportunity of asking more open-ended questions later made this approach even more sensible. In this way, the data obtained from the survey was supplemented by the rich data coming from the semi-structured interviews.

3.2.3 Inductive or deductive?

Studies can take a more inductive approach (where patterns and themes are developed from the data) or a deductive approach (where certain theories are tested by using the data). Bernard is right when he states that this distinction, while being useful, is also bit arbitrary. "Even the choice what to study," he states correctly, "comes from some theoretical position."[230]

This study, as any other, is informed by the literature. Without a thorough literature review, the research questions could not have been set up precisely. To investigate, for example, hindrances for dialogue, does not start from nowhere. The literature has shown that they could be rooted in one's own or the other faith community or from the overall conditions in the society. There could also be more aspects to it. Stating this shows that there is a theoretical foundation for the research questions which could suggest that this research tends to be more deductive in nature.

However, within the broad issues that laid the ground for the development of the research questions, the way the research proceeded was more inductive in nature. Although there were a couple of closed questions asked in the questionnaire about the experiences with people of the other faith (including the number of friends they had, the frequency of talking about issues of religion and faith and whether one has ever been treated badly by someone of the other religion because of one's faith), this all needed to be fleshed out in the interview and was designed to contribute to an overall picture of relationships and contacts with people of the other faith. Therefore, the question with which the interview started, was: "Can you tell me something about your relationship with Muslims (or: Christians, respectively)?" which was followed by a number of

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[229] Bernard, *Research Methods*, 209.
[230] Ibid., 459.

probes about where people got to know each other, on which occasions they meet, etc. This is a very broad, open-ended question that allowed students to say anything that was important to them regarding Muslim-Christian relationships.

Apart from purposefully choosing this introductory question to give the research an inductive orientation, the question also gave students the opportunity to tell something freely which was a good means to give the interview the envisioned character of a conversation. Although a question guide was followed, students should not feel like being in a laboratory setting but in a conversation with someone who was genuinely interested in their perspective. It was important to provide students with this understanding, as later questions necessitated a basic level of trust for open responses.

That the research has an overall inductive orientation can also be seen in the way the research questions were chosen. They are formulated as open questions, not as hypotheses that were tested through the research process.

3.2.4 The process of the data collection

After the research instruments had been developed, the questions were tested at the end of October 2019 with a Muslim and a Christian student first.[231] Slight changes were made to a question in the questionnaire upon their feedback.

The 30 interviews took place between November 2019 and April 2020. The long period of data collection is mainly due to the start of the data collection phase at a time when Christian seminaries prepared for exams, graduation and then went into a long Christmas break. In addition, the leadership of a seminary from which I had planned to involve some students asked not to involve their students and so it was more difficult to find suitable Christian students for the study.

When contact with potential interviewees was established, students were sent a short introduction to the research project and who conducts the research. Students also received a one page information paper[232] (usually through WhatsApp) that outlined the

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[231] Following the advice by Bernard, *Research Methods*, 215-16.
[232] See Appendix A.

criteria for participation and the research process. It also stated that the interview was planned to be recorded and what would happen with the data after the interview. In addition, rights of the interviewees were named and the contact of the supervisor for the project was provided. Students were also informed that, should they wish to bring a friend to be present during the interview, this would be fine. The expectation was that students would speak more openly if they are not alone with me as researcher.[233]

The students were then asked if a meeting, usually at the choice of place and time by the student, could be arranged. Some of them brought a friend with them. However, if these friends contributed to the discussion, only the statements made by the student invited were used for the analysis. Due to the outbreak of the Corona virus pandemic, only half of the interviews with Christians could be conducted in person; the rest took place through WhatsApp calls, but the procedure was basically the same.

At the beginning of the interview, students were asked if they read the information paper. They were also asked if they agreed for the interview to be recorded. No one had objections to it.

After a short small-talk and clarifying of any questions the students had,[234] the interview started with the questionnaire which was administered on paper.[235] While the questions were read for the students, the respondents were asked to tick the box representing their answer choice. This kind of survey format is called "face to face survey interview" by Bernard.[236] For those interviews that were conducted via WhatsApp calls, the procedure was adjusted. Respondents had the questionnaire in front

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[233] The idea to carry out the interviews in pairs of students was discarded. In the very first interview, two students were present. However, it turned out that one of them did not fulfil the criteria (she was in a Bachelor program). It took considerable effort to receive the perspective of both students and to distinguish them. After this experience, the idea was given up as not feasible. Only the comments of the one student who fulfilled the criteria were considered in the analysis.

An earlier idea, namely to conduct focus groups was not followed through although it would have been generally possible. A number of reasons stood against it for this project: In groups, often only some members share their view. Because of the limited number of research participants, it was important to have many comments on each question. From a practical point, it would have been more difficult to gather a group than it was to talk meet with one person at a time. Lastly, focus group interviews are more challenging to transcribe than interviews with one person only.

[234] See the usual introductory remarks in Appendix B.

[235] Appendices C and D.

[236] Bernard, *Research Methods*, 198

of them on a screen; after the questions were read to them, the students named their choice and the answer was transferred to the paper form by the researcher.

After the completion of the questionnaire, which usually took less than ten minutes, the semi-structured interview followed.[237] Most of these interviews took around 45 minutes, some were significantly longer and a few took only a bit more than 30 minutes, depending on how much the students had and wanted to share.

Bernard describes semi-structured interviews as "open ended but follow[ing] a general script and cover[ing] a list of topics."[238] Semi-structured interviews was the choice method because they offer the opportunity to go into some depth when only having one opportunity to meet.[239]

During the interviews, exactly what Bernard lays out was followed: being in control of the topics that need to be covered while keeping the freedom "to follow new leads."[240] Students were told at the beginning of the interviews that while there were questions that had been prepared to be asked they had the freedom to take detours or add additional aspects. Only rarely did it take effort to bring respondents back to the planned outline of the conversation. Usually a comment as the following was enough: "I thank you for sharing your insights to this important topic. I would like to move forward a bit and talk with you about…"

The last question in the interview was whether the student had anything to add, if there was any aspect important to her or him that pertains to the topic under discussion but had not yet been covered. Some did not have anything to say, but many used the opportunity to, instead of adding something new, summarizing what was most important to them in regard to interreligious dialogue. This final question is also a way to signal the interviewee at the end of the interview that his or her perspective is indeed important and that the researcher is not only interested in covering the list of questions. Almost all students mentioned at the end of the interview that they enjoyed speaking

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237 See Appendix E for the interview guide that was used.
238 Bernard, *Research Methods*, 163.
239 Ibid., 164.
240 Ibid., 165.

about the topic and having been given the opportunity to think about the issue through the conversation.

3.2.5 The quest for validity and the role of the researcher

For every researcher the question of validity is paramount: "Nothing in research is more important than validity" writes Bernard.[241] He defines validity as "the accuracy and trustworthiness of instruments, data, and findings in research."[242] The main question is whether the researcher measures what he or she intends (and asserts to the readers of the study) to measure.

One major impediment to validity needs special attention. There is a danger in interviews that the interviewer has an effect on the statements interviewees make.[243] In this research, there was a possibility that students might provide answers they thought would please the researcher. Considering the societal emphasis on harmony in Malaysia, Muslim students, in particular, might hesitate to make comments that could offend the researcher who happens to be a Christian.

While this issue cannot be entirely eliminated, steps can be taken to address and mitigate it. During the interviews, it was crucial to cultivate an atmosphere where students felt safe and comfortable to speak openly. One strategy was to come across as someone who was competent to talk to them about dialogue, but who (as a foreigner relatively new to Malaysia) was not deeply embedded in the socio-ethnic-religious fabric of the country. Students should be able to sense that the researcher was genuinely interested in their input and willing to learn from them. Creating an image of not knowing everything already may have facilitated greater openness and forthrightness among students, although this cannot be empirically proven or measured.

The time available to build rapport was very limited. The attempt was to be as transparent as possible: Students were assured that the goal of the research was not to evaluate their opinions but to get a clear understanding of the current situation and the

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[241] Bernard, *Research Methods*, 41.

[242] Ibid.

[243] See the discussion about Response Effects in ibid., 184-89.

future prospects of dialogue and that, whatever they said, their opinion would be respected and taken seriously. They were also assured that their identity would be protected in the publication of the results of the research. This assurance – that depended on trust –, was especially important to some Christian students.

After the common small-talk at the beginning of the meeting and the appreciation of taking the time to meet, the introduction to the research was as follows: "Before we start, let me point out one thing: This is not a test, where you can give right or wrong answers. This is all about your own experience or your thoughts. Your name will appear nowhere. So you do not have to think about what others, including me, think about what you say. You can help me best – and the result of this research will be best – if you just openly share what's on your mind without thinking much how what you say could affects others."

While there cannot be a guarantee for response effects not playing a role, there is good precedence of researchers who received good data by going into interviews with an open mind and stating clearly that they wanted to learn more about people's ideas and way of life.[244] Best results are achieved when the interviews are conducted in a way that they represent "friendly conversations".[245] Being mindful of these issues is the best way to minimize the risks and thus to gather valid data.

3.3 Data Analysis

The mixed-methods approach chosen for this research necessitates different types of analysis. The questionnaire cannot be analysed in the same way as the semi-structured interviews and the fact that two different groups of people have been interviewed calls for additional attention. But before the particulars of the data analysis are discussed, a remark about the underlying epistemological concept is in order.

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[244] This is also the experience this researcher made during his doctoral studies.

[245] James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group, 1979), 58.

3.3.1 Critical realism as guiding epistemological concept

Epistemologically, the analysis is built on the concept of critical realism. Archer et al. write that "critical realism claims to be able to combine and reconcile ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationality."[246] The implications of this for the analysis are clear: while students made definite, concrete utterances that have been recorded and can be accessed, it is recognized that no researcher is without bias. This writer cannot leave behind his identity as white, male, middle aged German Christian. The attempt, however, is made to analyze, interpret and present the data in a way that others with access to the same data could agree to its analysis. The endeavor has been made to represent both Muslim and Christian participants in the research fairly and to write in a way that adherents to both religions find the study enlightening and worthwhile to read. While not ascribing to a positivist epistemology with a claim to objective knowledge, this analysis is meant to be inter-subjectively comprehensible.

This commitment seems to be of immense importance in studies that include topics of religion in a time where religious issues are often interpreted from one standpoint only without an attempt being made to see the other side as well; one must only think of the topic of Islam as a religion of peace or as a religion of terror or of Christian mission as being a blessing to humanity or a threat for peace and harmony.

While all analysis involves interpretation, care was taken not to remove it too far from the text. Categories have been worked out on the basis of the data and the analysis remains to a large extent in the descriptive mode. In an attempt to being on the safe side and making the analysis comprehensible and transparent it will remain close to what has been said by the research participants and not rely on interpretive analysis and the hermeneutic method; especially in the analysis in Chapter 4.[247] This is also the reason why, when quoting students, text was not adapted to correct rules of grammar. When a higher level of interpretation needs to be employed (as at some points in Chapter 5) this will be clearly indicated.

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[246] Margaret Archer et al., eds., *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), xi. See also: Berth Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, Critical Realism: Interventions (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 4-10.

[247] Bernard, *Research Methods*, 17-19, 444-46.

3.3.2 Three types of analysis

The data collected in the questionnaire through closed-ended questions are quantitative in nature. As already outlined, the questionnaire was designed to supplement the data gathered in the semi-structured interviews, not the other way around. As the study did not rely on a probability sample and worked with a limited number of students, the statistical analysis was limited to counting responses and calculating percentages. To establish, for example, statistical significance under consideration of chance variations[248] was not attempted and would have been futile under the conditions chosen for this research. For the same reason, no reliability test was carried out. Nevertheless, there are many results in the survey that clearly point in a certain direction, thus add valuable data to the study and contribute to answering the research questions. Beside the written text the presentation will use tables and charts to illustrate the results. By providing percentages, the results can be compared between Muslim and Christian students.

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews needs more attention. The method used was Content Analysis, which Bernard describes as "a set of methods for systematically coding and analysing qualitative data." He adds that "[t]hese methods are used across the social sciences and the humanities to explore explicit and covert meanings in text—also called manifest and latent content."[249] Bernard treats content analysis mainly as a quantitative method for analysing qualitative data, by looking for how often certain items occur in a text. This is partially what has been done in the analysis of this research. Some answers offered to be analysed qualitatively. For example, in question 6 of the question guide Christian students were asked which perception of Christians they would like to change in Muslims' mind. The responses could be grouped and counted and by that it can be seen clearly that the item mentioned most often was that Christians would like to change that Muslims always think Christians wanted to convert them. Wherever this quantitative approach made sense, it

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[248] Ibid., 520.
[249] Ibid., 474.

was used. However, by limiting the analysis to a quantitative analysis, much of the richer data would have been lost.

In more recent times, Content Analysis has been widened conceptually to also include a more qualitative analysis.[250] Graneheim et al. describe Qualitative Content Analysis as "a method to analyse qualitative data. It focuses on subject and context and emphasizes variation, e.g. similarities within and differences between parts of the text. It offers opportunities to analyse manifest and descriptive content as well as latent and interpretative content."[251] They show how Qualitative Content Analysis can be used in conjunction with an inductive approach[252] and how it can be used to analyse texts while remaining on a descriptive level based on manifest content while, when necessary, move to a more hermeneutic, interpretational level when interpreting latent content. As outlined above, it is this combination, with an emphasis on description, that was used in the analysis of the data.

Vaismoradi and Snelgrove add one important feature of Qualitative Content Analysis. While the frequency of codes is of importance in the analysis, the text must not be seen in isolation of the context. Or, as they write: "Context of data is the central part of the thick description of phenomenon and data in qualitative research."[253] It is not only what someone said, but also who said it and in conjunction with what else, that is relevant. This has implications for the coding process as will be laid out below. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis was looking for themes that are running through the interviews; their basis was not limited to answers to one question only.

Finally, as this study involves two groups of people, responses from both groups were compared. For the questionnaire the comparison is rather easy as figures can be compared with each other. For the semi-structured interviews that use a mainly

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[250] Mojtaba Vaismoradi and Sherrill Snelgrove, "Theme in Qualitative Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis," *2019* 20, no. 3 (2019).

[251] Ulla H. Graneheim, Britt-Marie Lindgren, and Berit Lundman, "Methodological Challenges in Qualitative Content Analysis: A Discussion Paper," *Nurse Education Today* 56, no. September (2017), 29.

[252] Ibid., 30.

[253] Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, "Theme in Qualitative Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis".

inductive method, the comparison is not that straight forward. The comparison will first set the results beside each other. This comparison shows where experiences and thoughts overlap and where they differ. To remain on the same level of abstraction for the comparison is of importance.[254] Towards the end of the dissertation, in Chapters 5 and 6, a thematic comparison was used, which adds a level of interpretation to the description. The aim is to point out where the opportunities for dialogue lie in the future and which hindrances may need to be dealt with for dialogue to be fruitful.

3.3.3 Analysis process

Responses from the questionnaire were transferred in a database, the responses counted by the software and converted into percentages. For the scales in questions 11-21, the items "Totally agree" and "Rather agree" on one side and "Rather disagree" and "Disagree" were grouped together when calculating the percentage; so were the items "Very much interested" and "Quite interested" on one side and "Not so much interested" and "Not interested" in question 22-27. This is in line with common practice and suggested by Bernard[255] for surveys with rather few respondents. In the analysis the results were used to supplement the data from the semi-structured interviews.

To analyse the interviews needed much more effort and different methods.[256] The recorded interviews were first imported into the data analysis software Atlas.ti and then the audio files were coded.[257] Selected passages were also transcribed. Each code consisted of three elements which were in fact three codes, as the following example illustrates: "M03M#04 If we understand each other, we can live together happily and in harmony."

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[254] Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman, "Methodological Challenges in Qualitative Content Analysis: A Discussion Paper".

[255] Bernard, *Research Methods*, 500.

[256] Guidance was taken from Graham R. Gibbs, *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (London, UK: SAGE Publications, 2007).

[257] Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research*, 421, explicitly mentions the possibility of coding directly from an audio file using data analysis software, in his example the software NVivo.

The "M03" stands for the Muslim student with the code 03, "M#04" refers to the question about benefits of dialogue and the following text is an in vivo code, using words from the interviewee.

The use of all three elements needs further elaboration which will happen in reverse order. It will also be showed how the coding aligns itself with the theoretical underpinnings of the research methods. In vivo codes use the actual words, phrases or catchy words the interviewees themselves have used.[258] Using codes close to the utterances of the students provided the basis for an inductive analysis. The codes have been kept rather long as the software makes it easy to look up where the same words were used elsewhere. Longer, more detailed codes were therefore preferred over short, catchy ones. In the above example, the rest of the data can be searched for the words "understand*", "liv* together", "happ*" and "harmon*".

However, as the questions in the semi-structured interview were designed to elicit information to certain aspects of dialogue, it made sense to include the code of the questions as broad, general themes in the code.[259] When research participants referred to a certain aspect that fitted better to another aspect of dialogue, the code for that aspect was used or two aspect-codes were given. In the analysis process, all codes were sorted according to the codes of these aspects. As the number of participants was limited, it was possible to go through all the in vivo codes within these aspect codes for the analysis and look for frequencies, categories and patterns that emerged from the data and, at points, look up certain words from the in vivo codes in the electronic database to see their uses across all interviews and all questions. This reflects the inductive approach within broader categories as outlined above.

Lastly, a second list of codes was produced which followed the order of each interview (this list could be retrieved by using the first element of the code). As not the complete interviews were transcribed, this served to keep the context in which

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[258] Bernard, *Research Methods*, 320, 459-60.

[259] Ibid., 460. Bernard writes about "general themes derived from reading the literature." However, in the literature to research design, themes are often seen as being developed from the study and thus standing at the end rather than at the beginning. In order to distinguish semantically, the term "aspects of dialogue" is used here to reflect the topics that were covered in the respective questions.

something was said in mind for which the importance has already been elaborated on. While coding and reading through the interviews several times, memos were written about salient or peculiar statements, about what was emphasized by students and about issues that seemed to need further investigation in the analysing process.[260]

The analysis was carried out in blocks for the Muslim and the Christian students, following the order of the research questions which is also represented in the presentation of the data in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. It was important to be well acquainted with the data concerning the experiences of both groups to be able to set these experiences in relation to each other.

The aim of these analytical steps was first to be able to answer the research questions by establishing patterns that are based on the data collected from each group of students. These were then set in relation to each other. In a subsequent step, these findings were then used to develop the themes that shed light on the issues stated as objectives for this study.

Having dealt with the methodology used in this study, it is now time to delve into the data itself.

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[260] On memoing, see Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research*, 413-15.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this chapter, the results of the study will be presented; combining data from the survey and the interviews. The presentation follows that of the outline of research questions in Chapter 1; starting with students' experiences in Section 1, followed by how they perceive the socio-political background impacts relationships between Muslims and Christians in Section 2. Section 3 will look into the needs for and benefits of dialogue in the view of the students and Section 4 will report the concerns, hindrances and obstacles they see. Section 5 lays out statements the students made in regard to their openness to closer relationships and more dialogue and the advice they would give to others.

The presentation in each section will start with the Muslim students, followed by the Christian students and closing with a comparison between the two groups.

4.1 Experiences

This section looks into what experiences Muslim and Christian students have made with people of the other faith. Where does it come to contact between the two? How do these contacts look like? In which areas of dialogue have students made experiences? What overall picture does emerge from the data in regard to the experiences Muslim and Christian students have with meeting those of the other faith?

4.1.1 The Experience of Muslim Students

The presentation starts with the Muslim students. The data was gathered mainly from questions 1-10 in the survey, plus the first two questions from the interview guide. Comments made during other sections of the interview were also used when they contributed to the topic.

4.1.1.1 How did Muslim students get in touch with Christians?

In the semi-structured interviews, students were asked at the very beginning to speak about their relationship with Christians. Out of the 15 students who made remarks in regard to their upbringing, twelve stated that they were brought up in a Muslim environment with little exposure to Christians or other religions in general. Characteristics of this Muslim environment include that their neighbourhood consisted mainly of Muslims, that within their family all were Muslims and, at least for some, that they went to religious schools. Only one student said that growing up with Christians was something normal and two stated that they had Christian friends in their school days.

The statement of M02 can stand as example for many others. He said: "I was grown up in a Malay, mostly Malay, community. It's a Muslim community. During my school, my study time at university and even in my working environment as well. But there is not lot of other faiths that I got engaged with." Another student, M10, said that he spent his entire education, from elementary school to postgraduate studies, in Islamic education institutions and that it was hard to find people of other religions. He ended the statement: "That's the nature of Malaysian Muslims." For many of the students and the way they grew up, getting in touch with Christians was simply something that did not happen naturally.

When looking at how Muslim students made the first meaningful contact with Christians after their school days, two activities stood out: four of them participated in programs organized by the university, to bring Muslim students in touch with Christians. A common feature of these programs was to visit a church and talk with Christians who could explain more about their faith or the participation at a dinner with people of other faiths. One student was given an assignment where she, together with other students, was asked to interview a pastor about Christian liturgy and to be present during a church service.

The second way how students got in touch with Christians was during their studies abroad. Out of the 16 students, five had spent at least some months, some even a

couple of years, for studies overseas; one in South Africa, and two each in the United Kingdom and in Jordan. While one of the students who studied in Jordan had no interaction with Christians there, for the other four it was the first time they had meaningful contact with Christians. One met Christians at the gym and made friends with them, one had a Christian study colleague, and others participated in interreligious activities.

Out of those eight who had participated in an interreligious university program or who had contact with Christians through their studies overseas, six had been inside a church and four attended a Church service. None of the other students had this experience.

There are other potential avenues for a first meaningful contact with a Christian. One student mentioned that he had a Christian roommate for some time at university and one student, who works part-time, has a Christian colleague with whom he engages in conversations once in a while.[261] Other opportunities to meet Christians are compulsory military camp and humanitarian activities. While two students mentioned that they met people of other faith there, Christians were not among them.

After the very open question to students to describe their relationship with Christians, the definition for dialogue as proposed by King as "intentional encounter and interaction among members of different religions *as* members of different religions"[262] was presented to them as the basis for the understanding of dialogue in the rest of the conversation. The additional explanation was given that "when people meet, they are aware that they belong to different religions." As laid out in the literature review, this keeps the entry level for what is considered dialogue very low.

Using the following illustration, students were asked if they had experience with any or all of the four modes of dialogue.[263] The four areas will now be discussed in turn.

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[261] Two others also had Christian colleagues at their place of work, but the contact with them came after their time of study overseas.

[262] King, "Interreligious Dialogue," 101; see section 2.1.1.

[263] These four modes are, among others, suggested by Pratt, *Being Open, Being Faithful,* 75-76; for the discussion of modes of dialogue, see section 2.1.3.

1) Sharing daily life
⇨ Conversations among neighbours or at work
⇨ Assisting each other in daily needs
⇨ Invitations to celebrations

2) Collaborating in social action
⇨ Taking care of homeless people
⇨ Caring for refugees
⇨ Working for peace in society
⇨ Campaigning for family values or environmental issues

Dialogue and relationships between Muslims and Christians

➢ intentional encounter and interaction
➢ among members of different religions
➢ *as* members of different religions.

3) Learning about religious experiences
⇨ Observing prayer/worship
⇨ Participating/being present during a religious ritual

4) Talking about religion
⇨ Having discussions about issues related to religion and faith

Figure 4.1: Definition and modes of dialogue

4.1.1.2 Sharing daily life

The intensity of sharing life with Christians varies among the Muslim students. There were some who had contact with Christians in the past, but not anymore (e.g., one of the students who had a Christian friend in Jordan). The analysis here looks at more recent times or at ongoing activities. Seven students said that they had no contact with Christians that went beyond buying something at a store where the store keeper may or may not be a Christian. Even with the wide definition provided above, this cannot be considered dialogue. Another three students had very basic experiences like very rarely sending a message on Facebook to former friends from school who are Christians or greeting and changing a few words with students at the library of which some are likely to be Christians. One student said her cousin's cousin was a rather recent convert from Christianity to Islam and they sometimes meet at family gatherings. All this kind of

contacts can hardly be considered dialogue, but it was what came to students' minds when asked about whether they share life with Christians.

Moving up on the scale of intensity one student said that he had good, but not deep contacts with Christians. Two said, they would sometimes share meals with Christians at work and also celebrate some feasts together with non-Muslims, either with colleagues or at work. For the one who said she celebrated Christmas with her colleagues, it seems that this is a Christmas celebration that is more a cultural celebration than a celebration in a decidedly religious manner. She said she never talks with her colleagues about faith or religion. So for the students just described, some socializing with Christians takes place and they are aware of them being Christians. Another student mentioned that he goes to the gym for workout five times a week. Among the people he meets with there, some are Christians. He said he had a lot of Christian friends.

For two students, contact with Christians was intense and also much more intentional. They were involved in meeting regularly with Christians. For both of them it started through university programs that included invitations to eat together. M02, who is very active in meeting with people of other religions, pointed out the importance of sharing meals as a way to build trust and as a step that precedes talking about religion. M04 relayed how through one Christian woman she was introduced to others and that she meets with one woman regularly and keeps in touch with her and others through social media. From what she told, it seems to have become quite normal for her to have Christian friends.

4.1.1.3 Collaborating in social action

In the introduction of this second mode of interreligious dialogue, besides the explanation on the illustration, an example was given to the students of an organization in the United States where different religious groups (in that case Christians, Muslims and Jews) came together to pack lunch boxes and hand them out to the needy and the

homeless. In the example, those who collaborated purposely came together as people of different religions.

None of the Muslims students had partook in a comparable initiative. Four students mentioned that they had reached out to the homeless[264] in initiatives that were open to and included people of different religions. These initiatives were conducted by NGOs,[265] student groups or among members of a college community (including staff). In all four cases, the students said that the focus was not on religion and anyone who wanted to join could do so. M08 said that the initiative she was involved in was not based on religion but on "humanity."

4.1.1.4 Learning about religious experiences

According to the results in the survey, six students (37.5%) have been inside a church building at some point in their life and four (25.0%) were present during a church service. These figures provide a first glimpse into the question about the religious experiences of others, but they do not show the full picture as other rituals or feasts that do not take place during a church service were also part of the inquiry in this section.

Out of the 16 Muslim students, ten said they had not observed personally how Christians experience their faith in church service, prayer or Christian rituals. M07 said she could not be present during a Christian ritual; it would be prohibited. When asked if there is a difference between actively participating and just being present, she said that for her both are prohibited: "We are scared that we might change our religion because we attend such a ritual." She said that other scholars might see it differently, if it was for purposes of learning or conducting research.

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[264] All those who spoke about their social action referred to helping the homeless. This could have been influenced by the example that was provided, but other examples were also mentioned, like helping refugees. It is also possible that helping homeless people is what is being done most in terms of social activities among these students.

[265] In at least one case, it was an NGO that had the word Muslim in its name, but was open to anyone who wanted to join.

Out of the other six students four were present at a church service; one of them, M13, during his time of studying in the United Kingdom. He said it would be quite difficult to do this in Malaysia. Again, four out of these six had celebrated religious feasts with Christians, in one way or the other. While one student celebrated Christmas with her colleagues as a cultural feast, another followed the invitation to be present at a church's Christmas celebration.

One student said that he had not been present when Christians were involved in any of the above mentioned religious practices but when Christians came to a mosque. Lastly, one student met a priest at an airport in Dubai; the two talked with each other and before moving on, the priest asked if he could pray for the Muslim student, who readily agreed.

4.1.1.5 Talking about religion

Two questions in the questionnaire dealt directly with talking about faith and religion. The results illustrated in the following table provide a quick overview. While half of the students indicated that they talked with Christians about faith/religion at least once in a while, only three did so within the last three months.

Table 4.1: Muslim students, questions 6+7 (survey)

6. In your day to day conversations with Christians, how often do you talk about faith/religion?		
☐ very often	0	0.0%
☐ often	4	25.0%
☐ once in a while	4	25.0%
☐ rarely	6	37.5%
☐ never	2	12.5%

7. Within the last three months did you have a conversation with a Christian that included issues of faith/religion?		
☐ yes	3	18.8%
☐ no	13	81.3%

Two of the students (M02, M04) are very active in pursuing interreligious dialogue through talking about faith. M02 was involved in organizing programs like an interreligious camp with 50-60 people some time ago. He is, in fact, so active that he was interrogated by the Special Branch of police about his activities. At the time of the interview he took some extra precautions. M04, after a program at a church, started to meet weekly with a Christian woman to read the Bible with her and talk about it. These two are the ones most involved in talking about religion.

Two other students said that they had conversations at work about religion. One of them, M13, is a lecturer in interreligious relations. He has Christian students and sometimes asks them in class if he represents their belief in the right way. He also has a Christian colleague who has a statue of Jesus standing on his desk and over that had a conversation with him about religion. The other student, M03, said, a colleague of his, a Christian, thinks about converting to Islam and conversations developed because he wanted to know more about Islam.

Two other students remarked that their last conversation with Christians about issues of faith and religion lies some time in the past; during studies in South Africa (M01) or when interviewing a priest for a course project (M08). Ten students in the interviews said they had no experience in talking with Christians about their faith, which does not square exactly with the results of question 6 in the questionnaire where all but two students indicated that, in their day to day life, they at least "rarely" talk about issues of religion and faith with Christians. Maybe students saw the question in the questionnaire to be wider than in the interview where the word "discussion" was used among others. It might have given it a more formal and intensive character than in the questionnaire.[266] It is also possible that in the questionnaire some felt more comfortable to choose "rarely" instead of "never."

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[266] For example, is "Sorry, I can't join you for lunch; I am fasting at the moment" a conversation about religion/faith? Maybe students included such colloquial conversations in their answer in the questionnaire but not in the interview.

4.1.1.6 Participating in a seminar/conference about dialogue

In the questionnaire, ten out of the 16 Muslim students – or almost ⅔ – indicated that they had participated in a seminar or conference about dialogue, where both Muslims and Christians were among the presenters.

4.1.1.7 Treatment by Christians

Two questions in the questionnaire dealt with how students have been treated by Christians. Were the occasions when Muslim students met Christians, rather positive or rather negative? The question has purposely been put in two different ways in order to highlight the issue from two different angles. The questions and the results are shown in the following tables:

Table 4.2: Muslim students, questions 9+10 (survey)

9. Do Christians treat you as a Muslim with respect?		
☐ always	12	75.0%
☐ most of the time	3	18.8%
☐ rarely	1	6.3%

10. Have you experienced that Christians treated you badly because you are a Muslim?		
☐ frequently	0	0.0%
☐ not often, but it has happened	4	25.0%
☐ never	12	75.0%

While the vast majority of the students had never made a negative experience with a Christian but were treated with respect, a total of six students in these two questions answered that their experience was less than perfect. To this must be added a few experiences students mentioned during the interview. For example, M08 was very disappointed that out of the seven churches she contacted only one was willing to

welcome her and her group to share some information about the Christian liturgy. M14 told that he once met a Christian in the UK who told him that Islam was a bad religion. He especially criticized the Qur'an. M14 then found out that his interlocutor had never read the Qur'an.

Another student, M04, who is very active in interreligious dialogue, reported that she and some others had a conversation at church with a pastor. They were talking about issues of faith and religion. When she wanted to contribute something from the Qur'an, the pastor closed the topic. She also talked about a conversation that she and others had with some Christians to learn more about Christianity.[267] At one point, she told, "the pastor asked me to maybe the love of Jesus will come to you …. We had a long discussion to understand the religion and the culture … in Malaysia and suddenly you ask about the love of Jesus. I mean, he gave us a hint to convert to … Christianity. I was, mhh, disappointed and it stopped my conversation." While this experience did not hinder her from continuing meeting with Christians, she clearly felt uncomfortable in that moment and remembers this conversation as irritating.

4.1.1.8 Summary

Data from the survey and the interviews show that for the Muslim students studying outside the country and study-related events were the means to get in touch with Christians. Apart from these two avenues, there is little occasion to meet with Christians on a level that falls under the chosen definition of dialogue. Almost half of the students do not share daily life with Christians; for the rest the contact ranges from very limited to meeting regularly with them. Although some Muslim students have been involved in social action and a quarter of them also worked with people of other religion, these activities were not intentionally meant to bring people of different religions together. While not many Muslim students have conversations with Christians about religious issues, two do so based on their work and another two have intense

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[267] It is not clear from the interview whether both experiences refer to the same occasion or took place at different times.

contact and conversations with Christians on a more regular basis. Almost ⅔ of the students have participated in a conference on dialogue and while ¾ of the students indicated that Christians meet them with respect and they had never been treated badly by them, a few recalled incidents they keep in their memory as being rather unpleasant.

4.1.2 The Experience of Christian Students

In the discussion of the experiences Christian students have made with Muslims, it needs to be remembered that the Christian students involved in the study were significantly older than the Muslim students which gave them more life experience and opportunities to meet with Muslims. It is also important to note that not all Christian students grew up as Christians. At least three mentioned specifically that they were born and raised in a Hindu, a Muslim and a Buddhist/traditional Chinese family respectively. The one who was raised Muslim (C09) immigrated to Malaysia many years ago. As a convert to Christianity from Islam he has a unique personal history that has also shaped his perspective on the topic.

4.1.2.1 How did Christian students get in touch with Muslims?

When asked about their relationship with Muslims, almost all Christians in the study referred to their experience in the time of their childhood. Some grew up with Muslims in their neighbourhood and contact with them came naturally. In their interaction, religion did not seem to be a defining factor for these children. One student, C11, who is in his late forties, reported the following:

> "I like to go back to my childhood, where 25 years or 30 years ago, when we were together with our Muslim neighbours as Muslims and the Chinese as a Muslims and we stayed together, we were neighbours to each other. And in that particular moment I can say, we can have very good relationships with Muslims, especially the Malays in Malaysia and we have very close relationship as brothers and sisters. We will play with their children, their children will come to us; whenever mother cook a [Indian] dishes, we will send it to their home and they will also send some, very, Malaysian delicacies to our families."

Not all students had such intense relationships with Muslims as part of their ordinary life, but all had their first contact with Muslims no later than high school.

While four students mentioned that their relationship with Muslims were mainly during their school days and after that they had limited contact with Muslims, they all sporadically did have contact again with Muslims during their lives; for example during National Service, in conversations with a coffee shop owner or because of official religious functions as a pastor. All Christian students, when they met Muslims after being out of school, had previous experiences with Muslims they could build on. A good number of students had other times in their life where contact with Muslims was something normal as the next section will show.

4.1.2.2 Sharing daily life

At least twelve out of the 14 students had studied something else or worked in the corporate world before starting their theological studies. This distinguishes the Christian from the Muslim group of students in this study. During their previous studies or work, many had close contact with Muslims on a day to day basis. C05, for example, shared a dorm and later a flat with Muslims during his studies. They had to learn to respect their differences and managed well as he said. He described their relationship as very harmonious. He said that later, when he worked with a finance company, he had Indian, Chinese and Malay colleagues but was closest with the Malay Muslims.

When, in parallel to the analysis of what the Muslim students said, the focus is on more recent or ongoing activities, three had no and another three only very limited contact with Muslims. They may meet Muslims in circumstances where religion plays no role, like buying lunch at a restaurant. Some may also have very sporadic contact with a former Muslim schoolmate, but their engagement or sharing of daily life is very limited. Partially, this has also to do with their involvement in church ministry where their circle of friends was reduced mainly to Christians.

Moving up on the scale of intensity, about half of students can be described as maintaining friendships with Muslim friends they know from their previous studies or

work or having to do with Muslims in a way that goes beyond greeting each other. One student reported of friendly conversations with a neighbour, another that he still maintains contact with a guard of a school that was part of his earlier congregation and another said she had friendly, although not very deep, contacts in her community with Muslims. Three of these students also mentioned that they personally assisted Muslims when they came and asked for help. C09, who is a former Muslim, spoke of many good contacts with Muslims wherever he meets them. He described his contact with them as follows: "We have wonderful people who are really, really good, good people to have a communication, good people to do daily life with, they are capable of laughing and smiling and giving you a smile back and helping or giving you a hand whenever you need and stuff like that. So it's usually like that."

The two students with most contact with the Muslim community are a former school administrator and student councillor (C06) who started to study Christian theology after retiring from work. During his active years in education, he had to take care of student affairs, went to visit students of any religion at home when necessary, went to mosques and funerals of Muslims, had to deal with disciplinary measures for students from different ethnic and religious background, and was responsible for aid distribution to students, often in collaboration with Muslim people or agencies. He has vast networks and moves in different settings with ease. The other student with very strong contacts into the Muslim community, C01, said that he meets with Muslims almost on a daily basis to go out for hiking or jogging. He has Muslim neighbours who use his compound for festivities and also chats with his Muslim friends about many different topics.

In addition to the way the Christian students described the way they relate with Muslims, four of them (C02, C07, C11, C13) explicitly mentioned that it is more difficult today than it was in the past to share life with Muslims. Examples where this was the case were the ease of visiting each other in each other's houses, sharing meals together or for Muslim children to accept a candy from someone else or to drink water from a bottle of someone who is not a Muslim. C13 said that to practice mutual

friendship is becoming more difficult as "religion is becoming like an invisible –, sometimes I find it's like an invisible border that we have. We don't see it, but it's there."

4.1.2.3 Collaborating in social action

Three students reported of collaboration between the Christian and the Muslim community they were part of. Areas of involvement that they mentioned were: cooperation in disaster relief, campaigning for environmental issues, working against injustice in the country, and helping refugees. In these cases, the collaboration has been taken up together by Christian and Muslim organizations; similar to the illustration that was provided in the introduction to this point.[268]

Five other students mentioned that at some point in their life they had worked with Muslims to do good in society, but in all these cases it was not combined religious efforts. One student referred back to school days, when he joined a Muslim group in reaching out to those in need. Another said he campaigned together with Muslims for a better society in preparation of the 2018 General Elections. Religion, however, was not in the focus. C07 said that in some initiatives of working together, they are aware that people belong to different religions, but that they meet on the basis of being human beings.

The remaining six students could not recall or share an experience where they worked together with Muslims in social projects or for the cause of society.

4.1.2.4 Learning about religious experiences

The survey shows that eleven students, or 78.6%, have been inside a mosque at some point in their life. Six out of the 14 (42.9%) also had been present during Friday prayer. The interviews provided some more detail.

Six of the students could not think of a time where they experienced Muslims practicing their faith in prayer, ritual or feast. Some of the other eight also had seen

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[268] See above in the discussion of the Muslim students' responses.

Muslims joining a church service or being present at a Christian wedding or at the baptism of someone who had become a Christian.

The experience of these eight students varies. For C07 it goes back to childhood days where they celebrated religious feasts together.[269] C05 went close to a mosque during Friday prayer, but kept a bit of a distance. The school administrator who had very close contact with the school community and went to mosques often had, however never witnessed a Friday prayer. He said "they" would not allow this.[270] One student who spent his high school years in Pahang in an almost completely Muslims environment, had joined a sports team in which all others were Muslims. He often joined them when they went to the surau or the mosque (although he did not actively participate) and respected their fasting and prayer times. One student, in his earlier studies, was asked to attend a gathering at a mosque and two students had excursions as part of their studies where they went to a mosque and stayed during prayer. One of them also celebrates Hari Raya with his friends and neighbours. The one student who had previously been a Muslim had, of course, the insider experience of both religions.

4.1.2.5 Talking about religion

In the interviews, only two students mentioned that they had no experience with talking with a Muslim about issues of faith or religion. However, as the following two tables show, only half of the students indicated in the questionnaire that they had such a conversation in their day to day life at least "once in a while." Again, half of the students answered that they had such a conversation within the last three months.

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[269] At that time, however, she and nobody else in the family had been Christian yet.

[270] He did not specify who exactly "they" are, but the reference was clearly to Muslims, not to his own religious community. In his answer to question 23 he made it clear that he would be "very much interested" in being present at a Friday prayer.

Table 4.3: Christian students, questions 6+7 (survey)

6. In your day to day conversations with Muslims, how often do you talk about faith/religion?		
☐ very often	1	7.1%
☐ often	2	14.3%
☐ once in a while	4	28.6%
☐ rarely	4	28.6%
☐ never	3	21.4%

7. Within the last three months did you have a conversation with a Muslim that included issues of faith/religion?		
☐ yes	7	50.0%
☐ no	7	50.0%

Out of the twelve students who at some point had a conversation with Muslims about faith or religion, nine mentioned that the conversation developed out of normal life situations. A few examples must suffice here. For C02 who had worked together with many Muslims in the past, conversations sometimes started when his Muslim colleagues asked him why he did not smoke, drink alcohol or cheat at work. When asked, he referred to his ethics that were shaped by his Christian convictions. Another student, C01, who said that he meets his Muslim friends almost on a daily basis, said that they sometimes talk about topics like the "Allah-issue." While in the media this is a hot topic, he and his friends can have decent, meaningful conversations about it that are not planned in any way but develop out of spending time together. C07 spoke about a situation that took place when she was on the board of a company in the past that had a Muslim director. They had a serious problem to solve and no one seemed to have a good idea what to do. When she was asked what she would suggest, she said she would pray for it. Her Chinese colleagues ridiculed her, but a few days later, the problem was indeed solved. She mentioned that while she worked in that company she prayed for various people, regardless of their religion. Lastly, C08 who sells medical equipment at hospitals sometimes has conversations with the Muslim doctors that go beyond doing business. One doctor had come back from the hajj and felt so spiritually renewed that

she was interested in what this experience means to him. She also spoke with him about her own faith.

Five students also had experience with talking with Muslims about issues of faith or religion in a more formal, planned way. For three of them it was part of their training to become pastors. Two went to a mosque and someone explained a few things to them afterwards (in one case, it was more like a dialogue, in the other more like a monologue) and for the other there was a program, hosted by an NGO during his studies, that brought Christian and Muslim students together. In thinking back to this event he said that it helped to find out how many prejudices they held against each other. He also said that they had a Muslim scholar who came and taught them about Islam during his seminary time. He and C11 also mentioned that they regularly had groups of Muslim students coming to their churches to learn more about Christianity. C11 also said that with a group of Muslims who were genuinely interested to learn more, he met for three to four months to hold dialogue sessions. After that, these conversations ceased. Lastly, C09, when asked in the questionnaire whether Christians should have events where they invite people of other faith, including Muslims, to come and learn more about Christianity, not only answered with "strongly agree" but added: "I do those things."

4.1.2.6 Participating in a seminar/conference about dialogue

Out of the 14 Christian students who participated in the study, six had at some point in their life participated in a conference or seminar where both Christians and Muslims were among the presenters; eight had not.

4.1.2.7 Treatment by Muslims

The two questions in the questionnaire aimed at finding out how Christian students experienced their relationships and dialogue with Muslims produced the following results:

9. Do Muslims treat you as a Christian with respect?[271]		
☐ always	6	46.2%
☐ most of the time	6	46.2%
☐ rarely	1	7.7%
Not answered	1	-

10. Have you experienced that Muslims treated you badly because you are a Christian?		
☐ frequently	1	7.1%
☐ not often, but it has happened	5	35.7%
☐ never	8	57.1%

At different points in the interviews, students mentioned how unproblematic relationships with Muslims often were and that they experience especially Malay Muslims as kind, humble and friendly people. While there are many students among the Christians who had never had a negative experience with a Muslim, this is not the case for all of them.

C02, who was very close to Muslims during his high school days and his earlier studies told that his friends sometimes called him "kafir." While this could cause harsh reactions, he added that they told him this "in a friendly way." There was no indication in the interview that it affected his relationship with Muslims in any way. In fact, in the survey, he answered question 9 with "always" and question 10 with "never."

The former school administrator was told by his Muslim supervisor that it would be so much easier to promote him if he were a Muslim or had a Muslim name and that he could advance more if he were not a Christian. He told them that his religion meant more to him and, again, these comments seemed not to have a negative impact on his relationship with Muslims.

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[271] In two cases, Christians preferred not to answer a question in the questionnaire. Percentages were then calculated on the basis of those who had answered the question.

C09, who was quoted above and spoke so fondly of Muslims in Malaysia, mentioned right afterwards that if people find out that he was a Muslim in the past but now is no more, the dynamics in the conversations frequently change drastically. He also mentioned that when he worked together with Muslims to assist refugees, the collaboration went difficult as the approach of many Muslims was to help other Muslims whereas for him, the help was provided regardless of religion.

Another student, C11, who had worked as a pastor for around ten years already, also shared his disappointment. He said that in his area, when the representatives of different religions came together in order to talk or to think about social projects, Muslims did not follow the invitation of others. They were only present if they were the hosts.

Lastly, C13 mentioned a situation he encountered some years ago. He met with a lawyer who brought his female assistant who happened to be a Muslim. When he wanted to shake hands with her, she refused. He said he felt "insulted" and described the situation as "odd."

4.1.2.8 Summary

All Christian students came in contact with Muslims not later than their time in high school. Partly due to their previous studies or work life, almost all of them had at some point close contact with Muslims, although for the more recent time six out of the 14 students reported they had no or no significant contact with Muslims. More than half of the students had collaborated with Muslims in social action; for three students these were jointly initiated activities with people of other faith. Again, more than half had witnessed Muslims practicing their religion in feasts, rituals or prayer. The number of Christian students was equally divided between those who do rarely or never talk about religion and faith with a Muslim and those who did so once in a while, often or very often. For some Christian students, the conversations developed more out of daily life; for others they rather took place in a more formal setting. Less than half of the Christian students have participated in conference about dialogue. The question how the Christian

students have experienced their relationship with Muslims was answered diversely. While more than half indicated that they have never been treated badly by Muslims, there were a number of students who recalled incidents where they were disappointed by Muslims or the way they acted towards them.

4.1.3 Comparison between Muslim and Christian Students

This section will highlight salient features of the data presented above and set the experiences of the two groups of students in relation to each other. In regard to the question how people got to know each other, the analysis has shown that more Muslim than Christian students grew up in an environment with no or very little contact to people of the other religion. For Christian students it has happened more naturally that they got in touch with Muslims at some stages of their life, whereas for the Muslim students university programs and studying abroad were important factors.

When it comes to sharing daily life between Muslims and Christians with a focus on more recent times and ongoing activities, ten of 16 Muslim students (62.5%) had no or very limited contact with Christians in daily life, four (25.0%) had a bit more to do with Christians and for two (12.5%) sharing life with Christians was something that happened regularly and was a normal experience. In the overall picture, more Christian students shared daily life with Muslims and did so more intensively. While six (42.9%) had no or only very limited contact with Muslims, another six (42.9%) can be described as having quite a bit of contact while two (14.3%), just like the two Muslim students at the high end of the scale had frequent and intense contact with those of the other faith.

In regard to collaborating in social action, out of all students interviewed only three Christians have taken part in initiatives where Christians and Muslims purposely worked together as people of faith. For all of them it only happened as part of their work as pastors, not as part of their student life. Four Muslim students had worked with NGOs in helping the homeless. These were organized efforts. For the five Christian students the collaboration with Muslims took place, in most cases, in a more informal

way. A factor important to many of them was that the good done for society was based on a shared humanity more than on a purposeful collaboration of religions.

The Christians in the study had more often experienced Muslims practicing their faith in religious gatherings, prayer or feasts than vice versa. While 78.6% of the Christians had been at a mosque, only 37.5% of Muslims had been inside a church. 42.9% of the Christians witnessed Friday prayer whereas 25.0% of the Muslims were present during a church service. 10 out of 16 (62.5%) Muslims could not mention an occasion where they were present when Christians practiced their faith as described above whereas for Christians this is only true for 6 of the 14 (42.9%) students. Some of the occasions Muslims reported took place outside Malaysia.

Exactly half of both sets of students indicated in the survey that they at least "once in a while" talk with people of the other faith about issues of faith or religion in their day to day life. However, in the past three months, only 18.3% of the Muslim students, but 50.0% of the Christian students had done so. On the basis of the interviews, 62.5% of the Muslims students have not had a conversation yet with a Christian that included aspects of religion or faith whereas for the Christians this was only a small minority of 14.3%. Far more Christians than Muslims reported of conversations with Muslims that developed out of ordinary life. However, when it comes to purposely seeking deeper conversations with people of the other religion, the initiative was taken up more often by Muslims than by Christians. One Christian student mentioned that he hosted programs where he invited Muslims to learn more about Christianity. However, two Muslims have regular contact with Christians where they talk about religion and two of the Christians said that Muslims came to them and wanted to know more about Christianity (one met with a group of them over a couple of months; the other sent a Muslim away who wanted to know more about the Christian faith[272]). So it can be safely said that according to the statements made by Muslim and

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[272] In this context, he spoke of the difficulties he experiences as a Christian pastor caused by the restrictions placed on religions other than Islam, but also for Muslims who want to encounter Christianity: "The situation in the country is such that if you are converted, you will have a hell. It is very difficult for them to even carry on with life also. … I will tell them: You try to find God in your own channel, own means, without upsetting a lot of things." If groups came for conversations, this would not be

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Christian students, in their experience it was Muslims who approached Christians in an attempt to learn more about Christianity than the other way around.

Well more than half of the Muslim students (62.5%) had taken part at an interreligious conference whereas for the Christians it was far less than half (42.9%).

While 75.0% of Muslim students indicated that they had "always" been treated with respect by Christians and "never" been treated badly by Christians for being Muslims, the figures from Christians stand at 46.2% and 57.1% respectively and are therefore significantly lower. The examples provided in the analysis for each set of students underline that contact between the members of the two religions did not always go well. Based on the data from the survey and the interviews, many of the students experience their relationship with those of the other faith as unproblematic or even fine; however, only a minority on both sides have good friends with someone from the other religion whom they spend much time with. In both sets of students, some remember an unpleasant encounter with someone from the other religion.

4.2 *The socio-political and religious conditions*

The attitudes of the students towards dialogue will be described in this and the next two sections. This section sets the foundation for the next two by laying out how students see the socio-political environment in Malaysia and how this impacts the conditions for dialogue in Malaysia. Section 4.3 will then analyse students' positions in regard to the need and benefits of dialogue. Section 4.4 will deal with issues students mentioned that they perceive as hindrances for good dialogue.

4.2.1 The Perspective of Muslims students

Questions 11-21 in the survey and questions 3-12 in the interview guide dealt with the attitudes of students. The points in this section, however, are not tied to certain

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problematic, but with individuals, he is very cautious. It should be noted that the student mentioned the issue of conversion without being asked about it specifically. For him there seems to be a connection between talking about issues of faith and religion and the potentiality of conversion which triggers for him the concerns this issue can cause for all sides involved.

questions. Students made many comments throughout the interviews in which they described their perspective of the context in which the relationships of people of different religions need to be understood. While Muslims and Christians often raised the same issues, in some points they looked on them from different perspectives as will be shown below.

4.2.1.1 Living together as humans in a diverse Malaysia

What is it that binds people together in a country in which people of different ethnicities, cultures, and religions live together? Is there a level on which people are united that is more fundamental than religious identity? More than half of the Muslim students mentioned that people are living together as "humans" and that whatever can be done for the sake of or is based on our shared "humanity" is to be welcomed. M11 explained how he would take first steps in meeting with a Christian scholar: "My responsible is to communicate and get to know with him as-, on the humanity perspective. We are all human, right? No matter, what our religions. The first thing is that we have to respect the other human beings." M10, when asked whether he supports Muslims and Christians getting to know each other and their beliefs better, answered in the affirmative: "We are humans. And then, our religion itself is, Islam itself, teaches us to have relationship with the non-Muslims." As the examples show, the students saw a shared humanity, which is rooted in Islamic belief, as a basic level on which different people can come together.

Some also emphasized that people of different religions in Malaysia are still Malaysians. M03, for example, said that while most of the Christians had Chinese or Indian background, there were no problems in interacting with them as they mixed with them since childhood. He then added that interaction normally takes place on the basis that "we are Malaysians."

Some students pointed out that people of different religions lived together well in Malaysia. M07 said in regard to living together with Christians: "We have good relationship with them. We do not fight." M16 said: "The relationship between the

Muslim and the Christian is good, is good. In Malaysia is very good. Because the Malaysia is peaceful." He continued by affirming that there were no arguments in Malaysia between adherents of different religions and that people lived together in harmony.

4.2.1.2 The intertwining of politics, race and religion as a problem

There were students who see religions playing a part in existing tensions in society. However, as some students pointed out, not religion itself is the cause for tensions, but politics and race are the underlying issues. M13 said: "The problem is about that everything in Malaysia want to be politicized." M04 strongly disagreed with the notion that religions are causing separations in society: "Political party can be an issue, different worldview will be an issue, I mean, we have many things to fight" but to blame religion would be an insult to religion itself.

Four students also saw race as an element that can divide people more than religion does. However, M11 illustrated well that race, politics and religion are sometimes intertwined and certain issues can be interpreted on different levels. He said that there was sort of a competition going on between the Chinese and the Malay. "They try to compete and try to overcome the Malays in this country. So, these issues trigger the Malays and I think that is-, maybe from that side it will give effect also in the term of religions." As a current example he mentioned the discussion around the introduction of Calligraphy writing in Malaysian schools. For him, this was a strong identity marker for Malays. The Chinese opposed this move. He said that such different viewpoints which have an ethnic background, could (and in fact do) easily become issues of religion. In this example, the Chinese saw it as part of an Islamization agenda for Malaysia.

Lastly, M03 made a statement that in the past two years, Christians tried to use politics to gain more influence and to question the special status that Islam has been given in Malaysia. This, he said, created some conflict.

4.2.1.3 Education

Another related point, is the education system that in the view of some students has an impact on how much people of different religions have to do with each other and what they know about each other's religions. The first aspect here is that the education system in Malaysia contributes to a greater segregation of religions in an indirect way. M15 said she had no friends of other religions and connected this to the education system she went through. She remarked that, whereas in the past, children of different ethnicities and religions went to the same school, nowadays Chinese, Indians, and Malay all had their own schools. With that, there came also a separation of children with different religions so that there is much less contact between them today than there was in the past. "The result is me, now," she remarked with regret. M11 made exactly the same point and ended his statement: "There is separation between races and then it will bring the separation between religions." While M15 said this separation is politically motivated, M11 referred to the administration of the government as the main reason for these developments.

But there is a second point in regard to the education system that needs to be considered. M02 said that Malays in the education they receive "don't really study about other religion" and M08, when referring to her years in secondary school, said that she learned nothing about Christianity. M14 confirmed that many Malays do not understand the basics of Christianity. M03, in line with the previous comments, said that the average person's understanding of other faiths in Malaysia is not very deep; it was nourished more by perception than by knowledge.

4.2.1.4 Is religion a "sensitive" issue?

The word "sensitive" popped up in the interviews at several points. Five students (M01, M03, M06, M11, and M13) used it. Although sometimes used in a way as if it did not need more explanation, the common denominator was that religion and, even more, talking about it or engaging in interreligious activities, has at least the potential to lead to negative outcomes. The negative consequences could be for oneself, as in the

example M13 gave. He said that if students of comparative religion, even with the consent of their lecturer, went to a church and pictures of that visit appeared in social media, others would blame them. There could also be negative consequences for the relationships between Muslims and Christians and, as M11 said, he would engage in dialogue with others but "stay out of the things that I know can bring chaos or can bring fight." M01 also said that there are sensitive issues that are best avoided, but that not all issues are sensitive and dialogue is possible. M03, however, said that it limits the conversations Muslims and Christians have together about religious issues. While common interactions between Muslims and Christians were normal, "about their faith, we not really talk much about it, because here in Malaysia …, faith and religion is quite a sensitive issue."

4.2.1.5 Religious freedom and the special role of Islam in Malaysia

Six students made reference to the constitution and the laws in Malaysia which differentiate between Islam as the religion of the federation and other religions.[273] M08, who converted to Islam when she was 9 years old, upheld the principle of the special position of Islam in the country, but mainly because she wanted to be a good Malaysian citizen. Personally, she placed a high emphasis on personal freedom in the choice of religion. M02, in referring to the limitations placed on other religions to propagate their faith and on Malay Muslims to leave Islam according to the stipulations of the constitution, summarized his point by saying: "So, in other words, I can say, freedom of religion in Malaysia is still limited."

The other four students who spoke about this point firmly supported the existing regulations. Christians and individuals of other religions should appreciate their freedoms while recognizing Islam's special role and position in Malaysia. M03 put it this way:

"We still feel, Malaysia is a Islamic state, but, even though most of the Muslim leaders in Malaysia, they are denying. I don't know why. But, since we have the top leader is a Islam leader and his responsibility is to

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[273] See Art. 3 (1) of the Constitution.

take care, to watch over everything about Islam. And we have so many agency related to Islam. And then-, so, from there we feel, Malaysia belong to Islam, because the majority is Islam, plus all the factors I said before. So when non-Muslim question about the special treatment on Islam, we feel something disturbant."

In his remarks to the issue, M02 pointed out that the way people perceive religion and religious matters in Malaysia is influenced by the regulations set out in the constitution. This would, in turn, have an impact on how they position their own religion in relation to others, which then affects their attitude towards interreligious dialogue.

4.2.1.6 The support for Muslim-Christian dialogue in the two religious communities

A number of questions in the survey and a question in the interview guide were designed to find out how the students evaluate the climate for interreligious dialogue within their own and in the other religious community. Questions 14-21 included three variables: It distinguished between (1) Muslims and Christians, between (2) the ordinary, common believers and religious leaders (imams, pastors, religious scholars, those representing Muslims and Christians in society), and (3) their wish for closer relationships and more dialogue on one side and their active work for the same. The following table shows the results; for the percentages the first two answers (affirmative) were added, so were the last two (negative).

Table 4.5: Muslim students, questions 14-21 (survey)

	Totally agree	Rather agree	Not sure	Rather disagree	Disagree
14. The majority of <u>Muslims wish for</u> stronger relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	5	6	5	3	0
	50.0%		31.3%	18.3%	
15. The majority of <u>Muslims actively work for</u> closer relationships and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	4	3	1	7	1
	43.8%		6.3%	50.0%	
16. The majority of <u>Muslim leaders wish for</u> closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	7	5	2	2	0
	75.0%		12.5%	12.5%	
17. The majority of <u>Muslim leaders actively work for</u> closer relationships and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	4	6	3	3	0
	62.5%		18.8%	18.8%	
18. The majority of <u>Christians wish for</u> closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	1	4	7	4	0
	31.3%		43.8%	25.0%	
19. The majority of <u>Christians actively work for</u> closer relationships and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	1	6	5	3	1
	43.8%		31.3%	25.0%	
20. The majority of <u>Christian leaders wish for</u> closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	1	5	6	3	1
	37.5%		37.5%	25.0%	
21. The majority of <u>Christian leaders actively work for</u> closer relationships and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	1	3	7	4	1
	25.0%		43.8%	31.3%	

A few comments to the figures must suffice here. First, the Muslim students gave higher affirmative scores to both ordinary Muslim people and Muslim leaders than to ordinary Christians and Christian leaders, except for the question whether ordinary Muslims/Christians actively worked for closer relationships and more dialogue (Questions 15+19) where the percentage was equal; although even there the "totally

agree" score was higher for Muslims than for Christians. While this seems to suggest that they generally see their own community more open and more active in pursuing relationships and dialogue with Christians than vice versa, note should be taken of the 50% negative answers in question 15; the highest negative for all the questions asked. Half of the students indicated that the majority of ordinary Muslims do not actively work for closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

Second, the Muslim students gave a higher affirmative score to the Muslim leaders in both wish and action (Question 16+17) than they gave to the ordinary Muslims (Questions 14+15).

Third, the contrast in affirmative answers is clearest in the comparison between Muslim leaders and Christian leaders. The students clearly see their own leaders as more open to and more engaged in relationships and dialogue with Christians (75.0% and 62.5%) than the Christian leaders doing the same with Muslims (37.5% and 25.0%).

In addition to these questions in the questionnaire, question 10 in the interview guide contributed to the insights here. It was stated as follows: "If you had a very good Christian friend and you were doing a lot of things together, eating (halal) together, maybe watching a film from time to time, you were just really good friends – what would other Muslims say about that? Would your Muslim friends have anything to say about that? Would support you or rather caution you? How about those you consider your religious leaders?" Again, the purpose was to find out how the – in this case, religious – environment of the students would respond to close relationships with Christians.

The vast majority of the Muslim students, about 75% of them, said that good, social contacts with a Christian were or would not be a problem and M05 added as a reason for it that "Islam are promoting the good relation between people." However, some of them also added conditions. M07, for example said: "I think they will be fine, because we know our limits. So as long as I did not cross the borders [rather: boundaries – S.H.], it's okay." M11 said that while other Muslims would encourage them to befriend others, they would also ask "not go too far" and "they would advise us to

protect ourselves." The protection in that case referred to remaining within the boundaries of proper Muslim belief and conduct. It is, he mentioned, possible that Muslims do things, visit places, or join activities that make their conduct suspicious in the eyes of other Muslims. M03 mentioned that when the relationship with Christians goes further than socializing and starts to include talking about religion this could cause other Muslims to think that you might want to change your faith.

The two students, M02 and M04, who of all the Muslims students are those most active and intentional in interreligious dialogue, experienced this. M04 was told by her parents that they were concerned that her close contact with a Christian could lead her to leave Islam and M02 has been under investigation because of his activities.[274]

In sum, Muslim students said that social contacts with Christians would be seen as unproblematic by other Muslims as long as they remained within certain boundaries. For many of the students interviewed, this condition was an important aspect. Only one student, M08, said that she did not care about what other people think.

4.2.1.7 Summary

The socio-political and religious circumstances for the current time as described by the Muslim students can be summarized as follows: A fundamental basis for people to meet, have contact and work with each other is a shared humanity – a conviction that springs from Islamic beliefs. It transcends religious divisions. Harmony as a status to be achieved and a value to be worked for ranks high in the perspective of the Muslim students.

Religion in Malaysia cannot be seen in isolation from two other social factors, namely race and politics. While religion can play a part in existing tensions, the underlying issues are often found in race and politics. According to the students, the education system in Malaysia has contributed to greater segregation among people of different religions. The structure of the system often results in students of different races

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[274] This topic will be taken up again later in the discussion of concerns and hindrances for dialogue (Section 4.4.1.3).

attending separate schools, leading to limited natural interactions between children of different religions. In addition, Malay children receive no or very little teaching about other religions.

In the view of the students, some care needs to be taken when talking about religion. There is nothing wrong with religion itself. However, when people of different religions meet or make statements about their own or other's faith, there is the potential that it disturbs others or good relations. This is why some students called it a "sensitive issue." Most Muslim students view the distinct constitutional status assigned to Islam, compared to all other religions, as appropriate.

In addition, they see Muslims leaders as far more open to dialogue and deeper relations with Christians than Christian leaders are open for the same with Muslims. While other Muslims would rarely see social contacts with a Christian as problematic, there are limits to be considered; not only to avoid the raising of suspicions by fellow Muslims, but also for the sake of the integrity of one's own faith.

4.2.2 The Perspective of Christian Students

Having worked through the background in society for dialogue and relationships between Muslims and Christians from the perspective of the Muslim students, next, the perspective of the Christian students will be described.

4.2.2.1 Living together as humans in a diverse Malaysia

Just as the Muslim students did, around half of the Christian students pointed out the fact that on a very basic level, all people are human beings; a fact that should lead to at least a minimum of respect and understanding. C07, a Christian with Chinese roots, saw the common humanity as a basis for working together with Muslims in projects benefiting the community: "I meet you as a human being. We are just from different cultures."

C11 spoke about the common humanity of people a number of times. He said: "Our motive is: Where we can find a common ground to build the nation, to build the

relationship between other religions and other people? Most, we focus on the humanity other than the religiosity. As a human person, we must accept each other as our brothers and sisters." He based this on the teaching of his church which (using his own words) states that "we belong to one God. So God is our father and we are children of God." One function of religion, in his view, is to see the person behind the religion. Religion could help to see and live this common humanity in a better way.

C06 and C10 made similar comments. C06 said frequently that he wanted to share universal human values. They have their source in God but can be accepted by all. C10 referred to the "good, common values" that are part of each religion that can be built on to develop relationships and friendships between people.

One value that was mentioned by four Christian students as contributing to holding society together is harmony. It was not mentioned as an explicitly Christian value, but as a characteristic of the people who live in Malaysia. C09, who has lived in Malaysia for many years but was raised abroad and thus speaks partially with the perspective of someone from outside, expressed it this way: "Malaysians are very much in love with the virtue of harmony."

Apart from sharing a common humanity and certain common values, C10 mentioned that it is sometimes advisable to leave religion out of the conversation and connect on a greater level, which is, that people are citizens of Malaysia. C01 noted the sheer fact that people live side by side – a fact that calls for good relationships with each other.

4.2.2.2 A (growing) separation between members of different religions

At least half of the Christian students made statements to the effect that there is a separation in the country between members of different religions. C14 said: "We just simply don't have contact in our everyday life with each other." C11 spoke of a "gap" that exists between people of different faiths and C06 mentioned that many people live in neighbourhoods with people from the same ethnic and often the same religious background.

Some students especially added that the distance was growing, that people do not feel as close to each other anymore as they did in the past. C01 sees a growing "polarization of the two different faiths" after the 2018 election. As the Christian students were on average older than the Muslim students, they sometimes contrasted the time of their upbringing with the current situation and remarked that it was less common today than it was in the past to mix freely, celebrate festivities together or eat each other's food (C01, C02, C13). According to the students, the causes for this growing distance are manifold and will be illustrated in the next sub-sections. As will be shown, politics and the education system were made responsible most often.

4.2.2.3 The intertwining of politics, race and religion as a problem

The connection between race and religion was mentioned by a number of Christian students. Two examples must suffice here. C10 stated: "Malaysia's demographics is so intertwined with religion and, and in every aspect we uphold our religion and we do give a lot of importance to it, based on our, based on the races." C06 gave an example. He said that especially in small towns like his home town, if an Indian guy was beating a Malay guy, the resulting accusation would be: "How can you beat a Muslim?"

Not only race and religion, but also politics and religion is an entangled affair according to the students. C01 stated politicians would "utilize, misuse religion" and C11 blamed politicians for the gap that exists between the different races and religions. C12 was especially critical of political and religious leaders, stating that they were "intentional in disuniting the people through religion" and that ordinary Muslim people were used like "pawns," "pieces of the chess." C13 also sees politicians as a cause for disunity. He said: "I am being honest. This country, the mess is mainly created by the politicians. I think in most country, that's what they do. They just make the race and the religion issue to separate the people and to create the suspicion." Lastly, C04 mentioned that it is politicians who tell people that Christians "always want to convert them into Christians" while she holds firmly that it is possible to live with each other and even be

friends, even if people had different faiths. In sum, out of the 14 Christian students, ten made statements to the effect that politics and politicians are contributing to a more difficult relationship of the different religions and their adherents in Malaysia.

4.2.2.4 Education

Going to school is a possible way of people from different backgrounds to mingle as section 4.1 illustrated. Three of the Christian students (C01, C04, C14), however, said that nowadays schools are not as culturally and ethnically mixed as in the past. C14 remarked that when she was young, children of all ethnicities and religions went to government schools but now "there are more choices and so with those choices, we are more segregated." She then added that for her the choice where to pursue her education started when she left high school for university whereas today, the choice starts already with primary school.

Two students went a step further by looking at what is actually taught at schools. C06 and C11 made firm comments that there is a lack of education about the religion of other groups in the curricula. C11 said: "I strongly believe, ehm, in the Primary schools and in the Secondary schools, we must have this dialogue between other religions, especially the dialogue with the Muslims." C06, a former school administrator, argued that instead of having separate lessons on Religious Instruction for Muslim students and Moral Studies for non-Muslim students, there should be a subject called Religious and Cultural Studies that all students take together. This would help to understand the cultural background and religious beliefs and practices of others better.

Furthermore, two students were deliberating on the attempts by the government to introduce Jawi writing in schools. Both, C01 and C13, see it as a way of utilizing schools to lead children to getting introduced to the Qur'an and Islamic texts. C13 said: "Ultimately that writing is leading you towards understanding and reading the Qur'an. So it is a subtle way of, ehm, trying to push for religion also, you know. But for me, I find that the schools should be neutral."

4.2.2.5 Is religion a "sensitive" issue?

In the view of the Christian students, religion in Malaysia was considered to be a sensitive issue and therefore needed to be treated carefully. Five students (C01, C03, C05, C06, C11) explicitly used the word "sensitive" in describing religious issues. It was mostly used in conjunction with the idea that religious issues have the potential to create tensions.

Three other students (C02, C07, C10) did not use the word "sensitive" but said that it was "normal life consensus" not speak directly about religion in daily life and that people treat these topics "as a taboo, they don't talk about it" (C07). C10 said that it was better not to talk about religion per se, as it "could lead Malaysians to get their antennas up." People could easily think the other person wanted "to attack me, or attack my religion." He would rather ask a conversation partner: "What do you believe in, what do you uphold to, what do you prioritize?"

4.2.2.6 The legal situation in Malaysia – Christianity from a religious minority perspective

An ever present topic in the interviews with the Christian students was the legal situation concerning religions in Malaysia. Some students made direct reference to the law or to that which is legal or illegal. Others made comments about "what's happening in this country" (C02) or that "we are living in this kind of a country" (C05) when referring to the disappearance of Pastor Koh, the prohibition to spread the Christian faith or the possibility of being accused of it. The caution, and for some, also fear, to be open with one's faith outside the Christian community was mentioned as an impediment to more dialogue and deeper relationships; it will therefore be dealt with in more detail in Section 4.4.2.

4.2.2.7 The support for Muslim-Christian dialogue in the two religious communities

As part of the assessment of the situation in the country, Christians were asked to which extent they saw Christians and Muslims as willing and active in building

stronger relationships and to invest in dialogue.[275] The following table shows the results:

Table 4.6: Christian students, questions 14-21 (survey)

	Totally agree	Rather agree	Not sure	Rather disagree	Disagree
14. The majority of <u>Christians wish for</u> stronger relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	4	5	3	2	0
	64.3%		21.4%	14.3%	
15. The majority of <u>Christians actively work for</u> closer relationships and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	1	3	5	3	2
	28.6%		35.7%	35.7%	
16. The majority of <u>Christian leaders wish for</u> closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	5	2	3	4	0
	50.0%		21.4%	28.6%	
17. The majority of <u>Christian leaders actively work for</u> closer relationships and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	1	7	0	5	1
	57.1%		0.0%	42.9%	
18. The majority of <u>Muslims wish for</u> closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	1	1	4	7	1
	14.3%		28.6%	57.1%	
19. The majority of <u>Muslims actively work for</u> closer relationships and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	1	1	2	7	3
	14.3%		14.3%	71.4%	
20. The majority of <u>Muslim leaders wish for</u> closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	0	1	1	8	4
	7.1%		7.1%	85.7%	
21. The majority of <u>Muslim leaders actively work for</u> closer relationships and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.	0	0	3	7	4
	0.0%		21.4%	78.6%	

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[275] The order of questions 14-21 in the survey was not the same as for the Muslims; in both versions, the assessment of the students' own religious community was asked for first.

Three observations from the data are noteworthy: The most obvious result is that in all areas, the Christian students gave more affirmative answers for Christians in regard to their openness and work for closer relationships and more dialogue than they gave to Muslims. The mean for all affirmative votes for the Christians side (questions 14-17) is 50%; for the Muslims side (questions 18-21) is only 8.9%.

Second, the difference for the questions "wish" and "work for" was highest for the ordinary Christians (64.3% vs. 28.6%). This indicates that whereas Christians generally would like to have more contact, deeper relationships and more dialogue with Muslims, in the view of the Christian research participants, there is not much activity in this regard. Question 15, which asks for ordinary Christians' engagement, is the only question on the Christian side where the percentage of negative responses (35.7%) is higher than that for the affirmative (28.6%).

Third, the Christian students see neither interest nor action on the Muslim side for deeper relationships and more dialogue. More than half of all answers for each of the four questions regarding Muslims (questions 18-21) were answered in the negative, with scores to question 20 ranking highest: 85.7% of the Christian students indicated that Muslim leaders do not wish for closer relationships and more dialogue with Christians. While the affirmative answers given for ordinary Muslims were low (14.3% for both questions 18 and 19), they were even lower for Muslim leaders (7.1% for question 20 and 0.0% for question 21). A comparison between the Muslim students' answers and the Christian students' answers will follow below (4.2.3).

When asked how their Christian friends would see them having a close relationship with a Muslim that also might include talking about religion (question 10 in the interview guide), of the 14 Christian students, six said that their friends would encourage them or support them or commend them for it. Another six students did not speak about an enthusiastic response from their friends but said they would be fine with it or did not see a problem in it. However, even out of these twelve students, four added that their friends would also tell them to be cautious in such relationships because of the law that prohibits sharing the Christian faith with others or talking about religion could

create tensions (C01, C02, C05), or because such close personal relationships between two people might not be seen appropriate by the Muslim community and it might be better to meet in a group (C12).

C06, who has a lot of contacts with Muslims, including Muslim leaders, said that his Christian friends repeatedly warned him that he was in danger of being converted to which he responded that conversion was his own decision, not something someone did to him. C09 said having very close friendships with Muslims would be difficult for him as he had left the Muslim community to become a Christian in the past.

4.2.2.8 Summary

From the standpoint of the Christian students, there are factors that contribute positively to the relationships of Christians and Muslims. Among these factors are the idea of a shared humanity and common values like the high emphasis on harmony in Malaysian society.

However, as especially the elaboration on the education system has showed, there are also factors in society that contribute to the fact that people of different religions have less contact and especially avoid talking about religious issues with members of other faith communities. In the perspective of the Christian students it is less common today than it was in the past that Christian and Muslim children grow up together due to more segregated schools and neighbourhoods. That ethnic, religious and political issues are often intertwined adds to the sensitivity of religion; a topic that is most often avoided in Christian-Muslim relationships in order not to instigate disharmony.

The role of politicians has been seen as unbeneficial to the cause of good relationships and more dialogue by the vast majority of Christian students; so were the legal regulations that exist and that cause Christians to be cautious in regard to making religion a topic in relationships with Muslims. They also see Christians as rather open for deeper relationships and more dialogue but have the impression that Muslims, and especially Muslim leaders, are not interested at all.

4.2.3 Comparison

There are some societal factors that have an impact on relationships and dialogue between the two faith-communities on which both sides agree: They see a shared humanity, living together as Malaysians, and shared values like harmony as transcending religious boundaries. They also agree that the setup of the education system is not helpful to promote closer relationships and learning more about the religion of others. That the spheres of ethnicity, politics and religion are often intertwined was seen as not conducive for better relations between Islam and Christianity in Malaysia, whereby the Christian students took a much more critical stance towards the role of politics and politicians in this regard.

Other factors were noted by both groups of students but evaluated differently. While Muslim students appreciated the special role assigned to Islam in the constitution and expected others to accept the special provisions made to Islam, Christians saw this distinction as problematic. They feel that they have to be cautious in relationships with Muslims; especially if conversations touch on issues of religion.

This was also apparent in the responses to the question how the people in their own faith-community would respond if they had a close relationship with someone from the other religion. While a high number of students on both sides said this would be fine or even supported, the advice that would likely be given to them differed: Muslims said that other Muslims would likely exhort them to remain within proper limits or not to overstep boundaries set by the religion. Christians said that other Christians would likely tell them to be cautious in their relationships in light of the laws in the country.

The survey has shown that students see their own faith community more open to and active in working for closer relationships and more dialogue than the other. Looking at the other faith community, Muslim students gave Christians a score between 25.0% and 43.8% in affirmative answers in questions 18-21 and thus indicated at least some openness towards Muslims while Christian students saw the majority of Muslims clearly not interested and not actively working for closer relationships and more dialogue; the scores for the affirmative answers lie between 0.0% and 14.3%. Especially

notable is the comparison of what Muslim students say about their own leaders and how Christian students look at Muslim leaders. 75.0% of Muslim students indicated that the majority of their leaders wish for and 62.5% indicated that they work for closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslim and Christians (questions 16 and 17). The affirmative answers given by Christian students for the Muslim leaders were 7.1% (wish, question 20) and 0.0% (work for, question 21) respectively. The figures clearly show that Muslims consider themselves as open, so do Christians, but they do not recognize this openness in the other faith community.

A few more figures are of interest. For example, when Muslims were asked if Muslims wished for closer relationships and more dialogue between Muslims and Christians, the score was higher for the leaders (75.0%, question 16) than for the ordinary believers (50.0%, question 14). The results were reversed when the Christian students were asked. When asked about whether the majority of ordinary Christians wished for closer relationships and more dialogue, 64.3% answered in the affirmative (question 14), while for the Christian leaders the result stood at 50.0% (question 16). What this comparison also shows is that the Christian students were not as convinced as the Muslim students that their own leaders wished for closer relationships and more engagement with the other religion. When it comes to actually working for deeper relationships and more dialogue, Muslims ranked their leaders higher than the ordinary believers (62.5% vs. 43.8%, questions 17 and 15), and so did the Christian students (57.1% for the leaders, 28.6% for the ordinary believers, question 17 and 15).

4.3 The need and benefits of dialogue

What do students think could be achieved through dialogue? Is it necessary or even helpful? The needs, hopes and purposes for dialogue are the focus of this section. Special consideration will be given to the question to what extent talking about religion between Muslims and Christians is considered helpful.

4.3.1 The Perspective of Muslim students

The discussion will show that the Muslim students saw good reasons to engage in dialogue. One was that the Qur'an encouraged it with which the presentation will start. After covering more general as well as more specific aspects, the limits within which dialogue should remain in the perspective of the students will also be stated.

4.3.1.1 References to the Qur'an as foundation for dialogue

When asked about the need or usefulness of dialogue five students made reference to the Qur'an as the basis for dialogue with Christians. M12 referred to Surah 5:48 and M13 to Surah 3:64 when they remarked that Allah had created people in different races and religions and that they should get to know each other. M05 said that she should have more interactions with Christians as her religion tells her so.

4.3.1.2 General attitude towards dialogue

After discussing students' experiences with various types of dialogue, the next question explored whether they believed increasing this dialogue with Christians would be beneficial or if they were hesitant about it. The general attitude, shared by all students, was that dialogue is something positive and should therefore be encouraged. Some students spoke about circumstances in the country that make dialogue difficult or remarked that it needs time to develop dialogue. There were also students who only support certain aspects of dialogue (M07, for example, was against participating in rituals of Christians) and especially the question whether, when, by whom and under what circumstances talking about religion makes sense will need further scrutiny. However, despite this, there remains a strong consensus that dialogue is essential in Malaysia, where diverse races and religions coexist. None of the students advocated for increased separation or segregation based on religious or ethnic differences.

4.3.1.3 Dialogue to foster harmony

There were different motivations or purposes[276] mentioned for dialogue by the students. The one mentioned most often is a cluster of aspects that are best expressed under the headline of fostering harmony. While the word harmony was mentioned frequently – at least half of the students mentioned it explicitly as a goal or purpose of dialogue –, it was often combined with other words like "understanding," "respect," and "tolerance."

A few of the Muslim students should be heard themselves here. M03 said: "If I understand … Christians better, I have a guide how to treat my [Christian] friend." As the following conversation showed, for him it was important to understand Christians better so that he would be in a better position to avoid what could offend them. He concluded that point by saying: "If we understand each other, we can live together happily and in harmony."

A number of students spoke of misperceptions and prejudices that exist between people of different religions and that dialogue could help to mitigate them. M06 put it this way: "If it is for the sake of clearing up misunderstanding, I would suggest that it is being encouraged for us to have all these discussions so that we don't have ill impression about the other religion… So understanding avoids the misconceptions." In a similar way, M11 said in regard to dialogue: "That is the important thing to be happen in this country. Because we are lack of dialogue and communication with each other. And then, and from that lack-, from that lack of dialogue and communication we will not understand. And then from not -, misunderstand, not understand, later it will bring, you know, the fight, the misconceptions, the arguments and whatsoever." He later said that one problem in Malaysia is that the first thing people associate with a religion other than their own is something negative. He expressed his wish for this to be overcome.

M09 saw the purpose of dialogue in helping people to live with each other in "peace and understanding" and M14 expressed that by having to do more with each other we might be able "to have a better life."

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[276] While motivation looks more to the source and purpose more at the goal, in conversations it is not always possible to distinguish clearly between the two.

The general thrust of what the Muslim students said was: If we get to know Christians better and have to do more with them, it will be beneficial for our relationships, foster tolerance and respect, and thus help us to live in greater harmony with each other. In the expectation of M13, understanding would lead to greater tolerance so that if Christians knew and understood Muslims' agenda, it would then help them not to interfere with it.

4.3.1.4 Dialogue for the good of society

A second purpose that was mentioned by students was that of collaboration for the good of society. M10 saw the benefits in dialogue in creating strong communities where people help each other, no matter what religion they belong to. M03 noted that if Muslims and Christians discovered their similarities, they could build on these similarities and do things together, like taking care of homeless people; something he said every religion encourages. He also brought in the aspect that if Muslims and Christians worked together for the benefit of society it might also lessen the argument that they only did good to convert the people they reach out to.

4.3.1.5 Dialogue for the sake of truth and guidance/*da'wah*

A few students remarked that in dialogue settings, adherents of one religion could learn from the other. M15 mentioned, for example, to see how Christians treat their children could be a good example for Muslims. M01 and M02 emphasized the search for truth as purpose of dialogue and M03 said dialogue could help to learn more about one's own religion. While these voices were present, the stronger voice was that dialogue could help to spread the faith in a good and proper way and guide those who listen (M05), show them the right path and to engage in *da'wah* (M10). M06 said that understanding the other person better will also enable one to present one's own message in a better way.

In question 11 of the interview guide, the students were directly asked if they thought relationships with Christians and dialogue initiatives are also a means to spread

one's own faith. A vast majority of the students agreed. M09, for example, said that it was "obviously" the case "as we are talking about our religion." She confirmed that if she had a good Christian friend, she would like her to become a Muslim. M05 explained that if a Muslim had a good relationship with a Christian, "they want good things of [for] each other for here, in the world, and the hereafter. So we as Muslims, we-, because of our love, we want others also to have good life in the hereafter. So that promotion must be included in our relation if the relation is based on love and kindness." M12 confirmed: "It is my responsibility, my duty, to spread Islam." He said he would build a relationship first, but at some point, try to help the other person change the religion and embrace Islam.

The students repeatedly stressed that the spread of one's faith cannot be done by force. There were also different intensities of the wish for Christians to become Muslims: some would not pursue anything in this direction actively but answer questions if asked, others said that their responsibility was just to show the path, while others would try to find a way to be more intentional in helping a Christian to join Islam.

4.3.1.6 Talking about religion

The question whether talking with Christians about faith and religion is something the students see as good and beneficial – or rather not – took an important place in the research process. The students widely agreed that fostering relationships and collaborating in social work with Christians is positive and should be intensified. In regard to talking about religion, the positions were much more nuanced as the following analysis will show.

The first aspect to be highlighted is who should talk about faith and religion. Can it be done by anyone? Or should it be limited to some high level academicians or clergy or representatives of religious institutions? The responses to question 13 in the questionnaire provide first insight:

Table 4.7: Muslim students, question 13 (survey)

13. If at all, <u>only Muslim leaders and Christian leaders</u> should <u>talk about issues of religion</u>; not the ordinary people.		
☐ totally agree	3	31.3%
☐ rather agree	2	
☐ not sure	2	12.5%
☐ rather disagree	4	56.3%
☐ disagree	5	

Just over half of the Muslim students indicated that they "rather disagree" or "disagree" that only religious leaders should talk about issues of religion; thus implying that there is a way in which common believers also can have conversations about religion. However, about a third answered in the affirmative to the question.

Two questions in the interview were used to learn more about the positions students hold. They will be introduced first. In Question 7, students were shown the illustration with comments of Mr. A and Mr. B and then asked who of the two they support, why, and whether or not the other person also had a point. This is the illustration used:
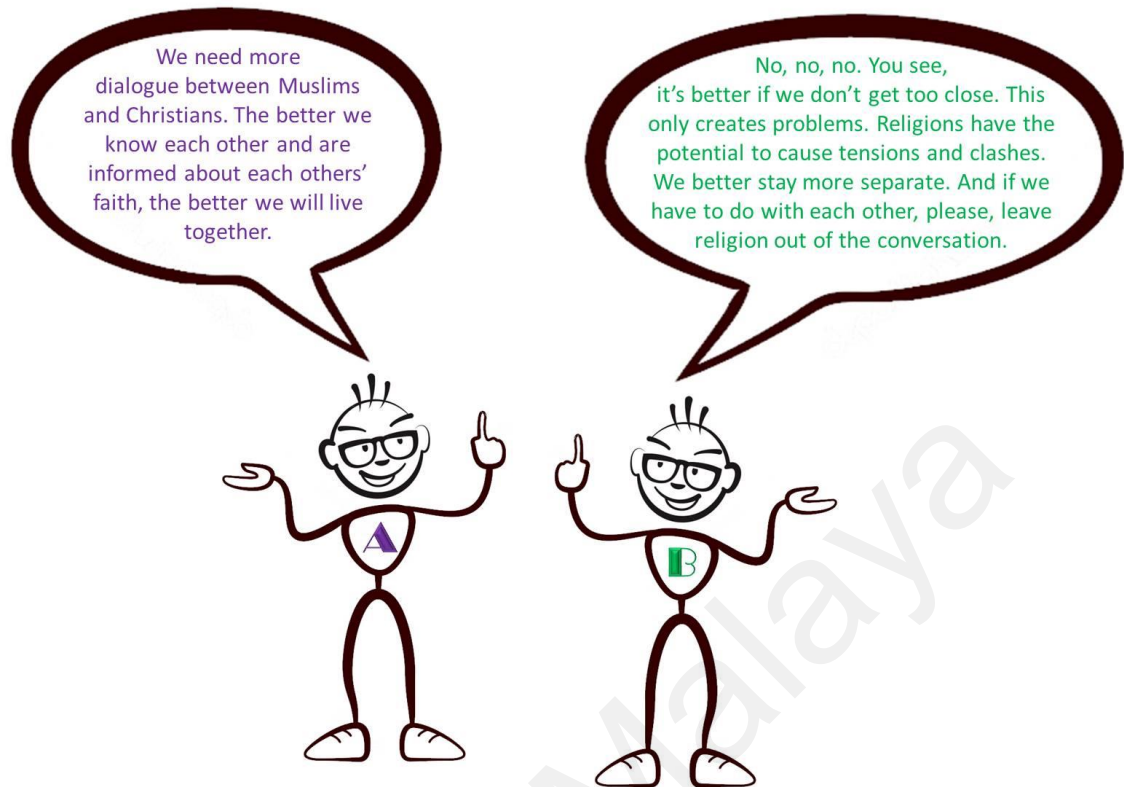
Figure 4.2: Illustration used for question 7 (interview)

The question was designed to find out the interviewees' opinions whether Muslims and Christians should rather stay more separate and in that way ensure that the society keeps calm and peaceful or if the opposite was true. In addition, especially based on the last sentence in Mr. B's statement, it should be found out how students think about people talking about their religion with others. The presentation also includes remarks made by students at other points during the interviews.[277]

While a few students, like M10, mentioned that it might be better to leave conversations about faith and religion out of relationships and concentrate on sharing life and collaborating in social action, others, like M15, did not see any problems at all when ordinary Muslims wanted to engage in conversations about faith and religion with Christians. She would even encourage them to do so.

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[277] For example, in response to question 15 of the interview guide; see Appendix 5. This question will be taken up again in more detail in section 4.5.1.4.

However, for most students the answers were more nuanced and fell somehow between these two positions. They recognized that talking about religion and faith is likely to involve disagreement and has the potential to lead to arguments. In their argumentation, two aspects need to be seen together: One is the question who is involved in the dialogue; the other has to do with the content of the dialogue.

Already in the survey, when asked whether only religious leaders should talk about issues of religion, M01 said: "I think it is depend on what issues." Common believers should not automatically be excluded from talking about their faith. M03, who shared the same attitude, provided the reasoning for it: "In our life, we cannot separate from religion." He went on to say: "If people try to leave religion out of the conversation, I see this kind of people actually leave religion out of their life. … We as Muslims in Malaysia, we treat religion in every aspect in our life."

If Muslims wanted to engage in dialogue with Christians, it is important, according to the students, that they know their own religion. If this was not the case, they could misrepresent it, end up in unhelpful arguments or be led astray in the dialogue. Being a devout Muslim does not, according to the students, automatically mean that someone has much knowledge about the religion.

M14 also remarked that conversations about religion and faith between ordinary people are fine, as long as they proceed normal and without problems. If a discussion could get tense or create conflict, then, in his opinion, it would be better not to pursue that topic further.

M12 put it this way: "Let the ordinary people engage [in conversations]. We teach them about the foundation of Islam itself and the manners about when we interact. … But in case of deeper conversation that they do not have the knowledge about that, [they should] refer to the scholars."

This last sentence also reflects a point made by many of the Muslim students: There are issues better handled by those with more knowledge, the scholars. Taken together, the majority perspective of the students can be summed up as follows: The more knowledgeable people are about their own faith (and, to some extent, about the

other faith and the way how to communicate with others), the deeper they can engage in the conversation about faith and religion.

4.3.1.7 Limits/Boundaries

Many Muslim students showed their openness, at least to certain aspects of dialogue. However, the discussion here would be incomplete if the issue of "limits" was not taken into consideration. Five of the students actually used the word "limits," some others spoke about "boundaries" or "borders" or things that could "go too far." M13 can serve as an example here: He mentioned limits three different times during the interview. When asked about the dangers of dialogue, he said there were limits as to what dialogue should do. If it promoted pluralism and led people to dismiss that there is truth and that truth claims might also contradict each other, this would mean dialogue had gone beyond the limit. He then referred to limits again when being asked what others would think if he had a very good Christian friend. He said that as long as he remained within the limits, no one would have objections. As example he mentioned that participating in a Christian ritual would move beyond the limits. He made similar reference when asked what advice he would give to a young Muslim who had just established a friendly relationship with a Christian.

Where exactly the boundaries lie – for example, whether Muslims could be present during a Christian ritual or celebration – was seen differently by the students. M09 saw no problems as long as Muslims did not actively participate but only observed what was happening while M07 saw the boundary already overstepped if a Muslim was present during such an occasion. What they had in common was the concept that there *are* limits and boundaries as to what Muslims should do and what not in dialogue.

Taken together, the concept of "limits" was used in different respects. The main point was that Muslims should not do what is against Muslim faith or belief or accept what according to Islamic teaching cannot be accepted. M05, for example, mentioned that she would still wear proper Muslim attire and head-cover when being around Christians and would not give up on that. Another aspect was that dialogue could cross

the boundaries for what it was meant to be; this is, when it is not about sharing information and gaining knowledge about another faith, but when it leads Muslims away from their own faith. M08 also mentioned that there are boundaries in regard to the manner in which dialogue is conducted and that it should not lead to harshness and fighting. However, the main focus in regard to limits or boundaries was that dialogue must not lead Muslims to deny what is important to their faith. Anything that would contribute to that was seen as overstepping limits and crossing boundaries.

4.3.1.8 Summary

The Muslim students in this research saw a number of Qur'anic texts supporting relationships and dialogue with Christians; they also had a generally positive attitude towards dialogue. The three outstanding aims of dialogue as seen by the Muslim students were first, to contribute to a more harmonious society; second, to reduce what hinders the common work for the good of society and to strengthen relationships so that society can flourish; and third, to learn more about the truth, provide guidance and also to help Christians to find in Islam the true religion.

Talking about religion and faith with a Christian in the view of the Muslim students is something that has to be done mindfully in order not to create more tensions. As long as people feel comfortable and well equipped, they can talk about it, but it depends on their knowledge of their religion. The more people know, the better they are equipped to talk about religious issues. According to the students, there are topics that are better handled by Muslim leaders. While the students clearly saw the benefits of deeper relationships and more dialogue with Christians, they also pointed out that for every Muslim there are limits set by the religion that no one should overstep in order not to compromise one's faith.

4.3.2 The Perspective of Christian Students

The discussion of the Christian students' perspective follows a similar outline. The Christian students did not refer much to Christian Scripture, so this point will not

be mentioned. They also framed some topics slightly differently as the headlines and the illustrations from the survey and the interviews will show.

4.3.2.1 General attitude towards dialogue

All Christian students, when asked whether the different aspects of dialogue were something that they see as helpful and as something they would support, answered generally in the positive, but oftentimes with qualifications. C03, for example, said that in cities like Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, where people are "more tolerant with each other belief" closer relationships and more dialogue could be possible while in the rural areas, especially along the East coast of Malaysia, it would be more difficult. Some students (C06, C11) pointed out that more dialogue would require that Muslims were willing to learn something about other religions, too, and C03, while fully supporting the idea, said several times that Muslims were "defensive" and most likely not interested in talking about religious things with Christians.

The issue of talking about religion needs more elaboration as the Christian students were quite detailed in how they saw the pros and cons of it (4.3.2.5). While the Christian students saw building relationship and collaborating in social action as something that should be encouraged, they were, in the overall picture, much more reluctant when it comes to being present at Muslim rituals and about talking about religion. C14 put it this way: "I think it would be good to have more of like-, for example, sharing our daily lives together or collaborating in social action… That would be something more in our culture… We are more toward doing things together than talking about religion."

Nevertheless, the notion that society needs the connection between people of different faiths was pointed out by various students who highlighted that Malaysia is a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious country (C05, C06, C13). Asked where he would see the benefits of the different aspects of dialogue, C01 answered by highlighting the need of personal relationships in a diverse country: "As a society, especially when you live, like in Malaysia, we have different ethnicity, different

cultures, but because we have been living together for so long, uhm, as a country we need all this in our country to maintain the peace and maintain the harmony, to actually have the mutual respect."

4.3.2.2 Dialogue to enhance understanding

There were different purposes, goals or benefits of better relationships and more dialogue mentioned by the students. Harmony was among them, but as a goal of dialogue it was only mentioned by three students (C01, C05, C06). With "respect" it is similar. It appeared in various interviews, but as a direct goal of dialogue, only C01 and C05 mentioned it. C05 said that if people knew more about each other's religion, they could then better respect what is important to them. He referred to a situation when he lived in a dorm with some Muslims. He took the Qur'an of one of his roommates and without bad intentions put it at a place where it should not have been placed. They talked about it, he learned how Muslims treat their holy book and he was better able to respect their religious feelings and convictions. However, rather than as a goal of dialogue, most of the time respect was considered something that is needed and should be displayed when meeting people who follow another religion.

C01 and C06 said that knowing each other and each other's faith better, would enhance people's shared lives: "It's better to know each other faiths and maybe, actually, we'll live together more peacefully" (C01). On the other hand, C09 pointed out that knowing more about the other faith does not automatically lead people to live better with each other. He said: "Just a lack of information is not the core issue." One could know much about another religion and still not really understand it. "To solve the core issue, I would say, we need to get on ... the path of maturity."

While the previous goals were mentioned by a few students each, the dominant aspect was to increase understanding through better relations and dialogue. This was mentioned by eleven out of the 14 students. This goes along with the comments of seven students (half of the sample) who said that what Muslims think of Christians is not always correct. It could also be the other way around or reciprocal. The words used

to express this, varied. C02 spoke about "perceptions" Muslims had about Christians that the only thing Christians wanted to do was to convert them. He also spoke about "prejudices" and that many Muslims had been "brainwashed" by their leaders about what they should think about Christians. C11 said that fanatic Muslim leaders were responsible for creating an "unpleasant environment and unpleasant relationship between Muslims and other religions" in which people are "suspicious to each other."

C01 pointed out that the same holds true for many Christians. He said that the things that happen on a global scale, like linking Islam with terrorism, also affect perceptions of Muslims in Malaysia. He continued: "People will tend to perceive Muslims as all being the same, which they are not. … But the thing is that what we see in the news is the one that affects us. So I guess-, uhm, but when you actually meet face to face and talk to them on common ground, you don't –, you actually see them very different."

C13, when speaking about his participation in a seminar during his theological education said that they realized how much "prejudices" they had held against each other. Later, he pointed out the need for dialogue by saying: "In order for somebody to understand us better, there must be a dialogue, la." He added: "The more we share, then only we can understand what do they have in their mind." It would also help to "correct the ideas" that Muslims wrongly hold about Christians or their faith.

C04 wished that through dialogue "we can promote the understanding between each of us. … I know a bit, a little bit about Muslim, but I don't know the big picture about Muslim. And then I will-, or we tend to, we tend to label them … but actually they are more than that…, like the stereotype that we have. So maybe through more interaction with them … we could help our relationship to become closer." When asked what she thought the benefits of closer relationship and more dialogue were, she said: "To learn more about each other. Because right now, I think, you know, we have a lot of misperception about, you know, their faith and our faith. We don't know what they believe in and they don't know what we believe in. So, there is a lot of, uhm, misperception there."

As these examples show, the hope of Christian students is that through dialogue in its various forms, prejudices, misperceptions, suspicions, quick judgements and stereotypes could be overcome and a greater understanding evolve. Some went beyond this in expressing that better contact and more dialogue could lead to more respect for each other, a better way of living together and a more harmonious society. As C13 said: "We can break the barrier between race and culture and all that, la."

4.3.2.3 Dialogue for the sake of society

An aspect that featured prominently in the comments made by the Christian students was that if Christians and Muslims came closer together, they could serve the people and society better. Twelve out of 14 students made comments in that regard. C10, for example, mentioned that all religions teach that if there is injustice, people should stand up against it. If Christians and Muslims found common ground in such things, they could work together for the good of society. C12 said: "As Christians and Muslims we should have more conversation regarding … what we can contribute together as a [i.e.: to – S.H.] society."

C14 referred to initiatives that took place in the past, mainly in rural areas, where people worked together to improve things in the neighbourhood or clean the environment, or that men patrolled the neighbourhood in the night. She said: "These are concepts that is close to our heart." She highlighted that in these activities, ethnic and religious affiliation played no role whatsoever. Like three others who stressed collaboration, she mentioned that while it was good to work together, it was best not to put an emphasis on religion, but on a common goal. C03 said: "If you put religion aside, we-, at the end of the day, we are all still humans and we are trying to do something good to this country." C07 said that if people of different faith supported each other's projects, "it's not: I am doing this thing religiously." While knowing that people had different ethnic and religious background, these aspects were not of importance in these activities. "I meet you as a human being;" this was the level on which to work together, she said.

4.3.2.4 Dialogue to share the Christian message

The idea that dialogue could contribute to finding truth or getting to know one's own faith better was not mentioned as a benefit of dialogue, except by one student. C11 remarked, in the answer to Question 15 of the interview guide, that if a young person started to talk about faith with a Muslim, this would make the Christian think more seriously about Christianity and to get to know his own faith better. Dialogue helps, he continued, to be better rooted in one's own religion. But, as mentioned, he was the only Christian student highlighting this aspect.

Another aspect, however, needs more attention. When asked about the benefits of dialogue, three students mentioned that it could aid to "share the gospel" with others. C01 explained this in a sense that he wanted to understand how others thought so that he could, should it come to a conversation about it, explain his own faith in a way that is respectful and helped others to understand it. C08 and C10 saw it more as an opportunity to present the Christian message in a way that involves the wish or the hope for others to accept this message and at some point to become Christians.

When students were asked more directly, later, in question 11 of the interview guide, whether good relationships and dialogue were a means to share their own faith, the conversation about the topic went deeper. In one way or the other, all Christian students acknowledged that, in principal, the Christian message (or: gospel) is something that should be shared with others. This, however, does not lead them to become zealous propagators of the Christian message.

Nine students made reference to the law in Malaysia that prohibits the propagation of the Christian message to Muslims and for some students this seems to put an end to further thoughts about it. Says C03: "For Malaysia, the easier part or the sad part is that we have laws that prevent sharing any kind of religion to a Muslim. So with that, actually a lot of Christians … and churches don't go against that, because that is the law of Malaysia." C01, who has good and intensive friendships with Muslims, said: "It doesn't cross my mind to actually share my faith with them. It only happens when they ask questions. I have not purposely gone and shared … my gospel. I have not

done that. But people of other faith, of course, I have done that. But not with my Muslim friends."

This is the way most students handle the issue for themselves. They would not actively pursue to present Muslims the Christian message and invite them to become Christians. But they would be ready to answer questions about their faith if people asked them. At least nine of the 14 students made comments in that direction. C05 said: "I would be very happy if they wanted to know more about Christians in terms of, ehm, to believe. … I give the space for them to ask and if they really want to know, … there is open space for them." C07, having the situation for Christians in Malaysia in mind, also said that she was not the kind of person to actively raise the issue. "I would always wait for other people to raise it." C06 said that at the school where he worked, he sometimes told people that he did not cheat or lie because he was a Christian and that, should they want to know more about it, could come and talk with him. This notion, to live according to the Christian teaching and by that give an opportunity for others to become curious about the faith on which such life and behaviour is based was part of the way many of the Christian students wanted to live their lives in an environment where a more open witness to the message they hold dear is not possible.

Two further aspects should be pointed out briefly: First, while some students said it would be easier to speak about their faith after they had established relationships or friendships, they also said that their friendships were not just a means to promote their faith. C09 said that although he wished for others to become Christians, "that's not hindering me from just being friends. So I wouldn't be friend for the sake of converting them, but I will be a friend for the sake of friendship." C14 said that there should be "no strings attached" in the relationship with those of other faith, and C11 said he wanted to share the Good News not only through words, but through action. He asked: "How much I can be compassionate? How much I can love everyone without any discrimination for religion and ethnic or language group? Am I- can show them that love is pure, the love of God is for everyone?" So while the Christian students hoped this kind of lifestyle would be attractive, they claimed for themselves that they did not

try to live that way simply to attract people, but because it was genuine expression of their Christian faith.

Second, the idea of "go out and convert Muslims" was nowhere mentioned in the interviews. While some clearly wished that Muslims become Christians, C05 said that if Christians and Muslims came together with the intention to convert the other, this would clash. On the other side, three students (C07, C10, C11) explicitly mentioned that conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, not something that one can make someone do. C07 said that therefore, thinking of or speaking of a Christian having converted someone "has to be removed from our vocabulary." The decision was always a personal one and therefore, there must not be any form of force used in sharing faith with others (C05, C10, C11, C13).

To close this discussion, the statement of C13 is worth to be quoted in length as it stands for what many of the other Christian students in the study also expressed:

> "For me, I would follow the step of St. Francis of Assissi, la. Evangelization is part of the work of the church - mission. When Jesus-, before he left, he told us: 'Go, make disciples!' So that one, we can't compromise. That mandate is from Jesus himself. So we can't change that. What we can change is the methodology. So that's why, when I like Francis of Assissi, you know, the Pope took the name because of him, he will say: 'When you preach the gospel, use words if necessary.' That means he is telling: by our lifestyle, by how we live, how caring we are, by how loving we are, other people must be able to encounter God. And then, they have the free choice, whether they want to become a Christian and follow the Christ way or-, they are free, not to choose also. So I-, that's how I also prefer to do, la. It's not going and forcing people."

4.3.2.5 Talking about religion

The research instruments used to elicit students' attitudes toward the usefulness of talking about religion have already been introduced in the discussion of the Muslim perspective (Section 4.3.1.6). The aim was to find out who should be involved in talking about religion, for what purposes and under what conditions.

To start with, Question 13 in the survey yielded the following results:

Table 4.8: Christian students, question 13 (survey)

13. If at all, <u>only Christian leaders and Muslim leaders</u> should <u>talk about issues of religion</u>; not the ordinary people.		
☐ totally agree	0	7.1%
☐ rather agree	1	
☐ not sure	2	14.3%
☐ rather disagree	7	78.6%
☐ disagree	4	

According to the answers to this question, more than ¾ of the students did not agree that only leaders should talk about religious issues. There should be room for ordinary people also to talk about religion. This figure, however, needs to be fleshed out by comments made during the interview.

When students were asked whether they supported Mr. A or Mr. B (question 7 of the interview guide), the tendency was for them to support Mr. A, but less than half did so without further qualifications. There were those who did, like C06, who said he supported Mr. A to "110%." He saw talking about religions between Christians and Muslims as inevitable as both live together in Malaysia and have to learn to live together, despite the differences they may have. If the goal was a better society, so C03, the differences caused by religion might be brought to the forefront through conversations about faith and religion but they should not hinder people to live together and work together, which was the higher goal.

Half of the Christian students were more cautious. While none of them completely dismissed Mr. A's point, they said that talking with Muslims about religion was not always advisable and depended on different factors. C05, for example, said that sometimes it was better not to talk about religion in order to keep harmony. C07 said that "the vacillation between both is good," depending on whether someone feels confident in the conversation. If a Christian felt that there was an "agenda" from the Muslim interlocutor, it would be better to be more cautious. C08 stated that on one side, Christians wanted to get closer to Muslims, to understand them better and to be better

able to share the gospel with them, but on the other side, "if … the Muslims you are talking to, they are really fanatic Muslims, … it could be dangerous."

C13, who generally saw talking about religion as something positive, still acknowledged that "[s]ometimes, people, they want to live in peace. They know that when you talk about all this, it will create unnecessary tension in the society." Taken together with the comment made by C06 above, who said that talking about religion and faith could help to ease tensions, it appears that in the view of the Christian students, the usefulness of talking about religion depends very much on the situation and the people involved. This is also what C14 said who remarked that not all people knew how to dialogue with each other well and therefore might create more tensions if they did so. Some were simply not good at talking, but good at reaching out and making friends. Focusing on religion might not help, but rather hinder to build friendship and trust. She made the point that "just having dialogue and understanding of each other's faith without trust and friendship is not gonna get us living better." A similar point was made by C09.

Only two students (C05 and C13) said that while ordinary people could talk about some religious issues – those unlikely to cause conflict – the religious leaders or scholars should handle critical issues. For things concerning dialogue between Christians and Muslims to move forward, it needed high level dialogue, said C13:

> "Whatever change we want to do, no point pushing at the grassroot level. Grassroot level in terms of collaboration, social awareness, we can do that, at least bring them together, opportunity for them to see each other. That is good. But for dialogue level, it must start from the top. … From all their clerics, their leaders. It must come from the top. Because they have a lot of influence on how the people think and what they say."

On the other hand, C07 had questions whether high level dialogue could achieve much. She saw high level dialogue as something of "limited use" and rather as an opportunity to have a Christian voice been made heard in the issues pertaining to society.

While not many students distinguished sharply between issues to be handled by ordinary believers and those to be discussed by people with more knowledge or

authority, many students mentioned that those who wanted to talk with Muslims about their faith must have some knowledge about their own religion. The reason for this was, first, not to be "trapped" (C02) or not to be in danger to think "the other side is more true than my faith" (C01). The second reason was not to misrepresent one's own faith (C03, C12, C13). It would also be good to be "cautious" (C07) or, as C13 said, "prudent" as there could also be people with an "impure motive" trying to engage Christians in conversations about faith.

Lastly, two students mentioned their hope that verbal dialogue would lead to a deeper level. C09 said he wished that dialogue would not remain on a level to find compromises but lead to greater maturity and also to conversations where critical issues could be discussed that were relevant for society. C11, after expressing his support for Mr. A, remarked:

> "If we are not mature, not convinced about our faith, we become a threat to each other and we always like to talk about the common thing which does not engage ourselves in faith dialogue. Faith dialogue is inviting us for the matured-, uhm, matured in our faith, and there is a maturity of understanding who is God and who is man. … We need to talk about faith to each other, to understand their feelings, to understand their faith, to understand their culture, to understand dialogue. Dialogue means to understand the person who is in front of us. So we must dare to make a step to converse ourselves in all this dialogue."

This statement aligns with those made by others that if dialogue is supposed to go deeper, there needs to be a certain degree of maturity in the faith.

4.3.2.6 Limits/Boundaries not an issue

In the interviews with the Christian students, the issue of going beyond limits or overstepping boundaries was mentioned only once. The student mentioned it as something a Christian is *not* doing when conversing with Muslims. Here is C09's comment:

> "I don't feel that I'm breaking the boundaries of my religion when I love you. I feel like am actually becoming more a good Christian, because I'm a good practicing Christian and I still can sit down with my Atheist friends and talk about everything that I want or talk about, or sit down with my Muslim friends and talk about whatever I want, and nothing,

nothing in the boundaries of my faith makes me feel like I am compromising. But as a Muslim, I remember, that every conversation with me … would seem to me as a-, when I was a Muslim, it would seem to me as a compromise of my faith. So the first thing, the first step I would take is to call you to repentance."

The concern that through dialogue someone could move away from the Christian faith was raised and it will be dealt with below. However, at no point was the concern mentioned that through eating together, spending time together, or celebrating together one would compromise his or her Christian faith.

4.3.2.7 Summary

The Christian students saw dialogue with Muslims as something positive in general. They had, however, reservations in some respects. Aspects of sharing life and working together were seen with less reservation than other activities. The three main possible benefits of deeper relationships and more dialogue were, first, to enhance mutual understanding. Christians and Muslims did not know enough of each other and sometimes carried misperceptions and prejudices and getting together could help to learn more about each other. Second, when Christians and Muslims came together, they could accomplish something for the good of society. Third, dialogue was also seen as aiding Christians to share the Christian message with Muslims; something that all Christian students wished for to some extent. However, many would only hope to accomplish this by living exemplary and attractive Christian lives and would only speak more about their faith if someone asked them about it.

The Christian students acknowledged that talking about religion with Muslims could be beneficial for the same reasons mentioned earlier. However, on the other side, they saw also the danger that through talking, tensions could be increased. Not every situation was suitable and not every Christian was equipped well enough or knew enough to engage in religious conversations with Muslims.

4.3.3 Comparison

When comparing the statements made by Muslim students with those made by Christian students, the following points need to be noted:

First, Muslims referred to the Qur'an as a basis for dialogue much more than the Christians referred to the Bible directly. While not referring to the Bible often, there were points where they made it clear that their statements are based on their Christian convictions.

Second, the general attitude towards dialogue in its wider definition was distinctly positive in both groups. Getting together and being close to those of other faith was not seen as something that should be avoided, but as something that is enriching and has benefits. Some students mentioned concerns, and pointed out areas that should be treated with special care or saw limits for how far one could go in relationships, conversations or common action, but not a single student said that it would better to stay more separate.

Third, Muslim students saw one benefit of dialogue in accomplishing greater harmony; the Christian students made similar comments but focused on better understanding as an outcome of dialogue. Both sides were interested in dialogue contributing to a shared life lived well.

Fourth, and reaching beyond a personal level, both Muslims and Christians noted that if members of both religions enhanced dialogue, society as a whole would benefit.

Fifth, for both groups, dialogue was seen as a way to present their faith to those of the other religion. While the Christian students were more reluctant in how they would go about it than the Muslim students in the study, the majority nevertheless confirmed in principle that the wish to share one's faith with others cannot be excluded from the relationship one has with other people. Both sides stressed that sharing one's faith with someone else must never include a notion of pressure.

Sixth, both groups saw it as possible that talking about religion can contribute to the benefits mentioned in the previous points, but they also saw that it could have

detrimental effects, like stirring up tensions. The general perspective in both groups was that the more people know about their own religion (and, as some of the Muslims remarked, about how to engage in dialogue), the deeper the conversation could go. There were, in the view of both groups, but more strongly emphasized by the Muslims students, issues that are better handled by leaders.

Seventh, some of the Muslim students stressed that there are boundaries or limits that should be observed in dialogue. In no case should dialogue lead to compromising one's own faith or religiously defined behaviour. The Christian students did not mention this point directly. For them, there were boundaries, too, but they had less to do with issues of dress or food and the like and more with, for example, not prostrating with Muslims while observing Friday prayer.

4.4 Concerns about and hindrances for dialogue

There are a number of factors that, in the eyes of the students, make dialogue between Muslims and Christians complicated or difficult. Not negating the positive purposes and hopes of outcomes that can be achieved through dialogue, both groups of students also raised issues that can become hindrances to start or to have fruitful dialogue. In the interview guide, especially Questions 6, 8 and 9 were designed to find out more about these issues but, as always, comments made elsewhere during the interviews were also taken into account.

4.4.1 The Perspective of Muslim Students

The concerns Muslim students have in regard to dialogue go in various directions and are multi-facetted; they are partly inward-looking on Muslims, their faith and the Muslim community; partly the concern is for society to remain calm and lastly, there are signals Muslims sense coming from the Christian community they consider rather detrimental for dialogue.

4.4.1.1 Concerns for the integrity of faith and a misrepresentation of Islam

At different points in the interviews, Muslim students mentioned their concern that dialogue with Christians could lead to outcomes not beneficial for themselves, other Muslims or the Muslim community. M01, for example, said that when people with limited knowledge speak with others about their faith, they might misrepresent it. The issue of people with little knowledge talking about their faith is a concern that appears again in the next sub-section.

The greater concern, however, was that the students themselves or others who participate in interreligious dialogue could leave Islam. This concern was raised only in conjunction with talking about religion and participating in rituals, it was not mentioned in conjunction with having social contacts with Christians or collaborating in work for society. When M05 was asked if she was interested in talking about religious issues with a Christian scholar, her response was that it would be okay, but she was "afraid" this person would be "too convincing."

M07 said that she had no experience in attending a Christian ritual and that it would be considered *shirk* for her. When asked whether she saw a distinction between just being present out of a desire to learn more and, on the other side, actively participating, she responded: "If I am not mistaken, for me, for me is prohibited. Other scholars may say: Is okay, if you want to learn as part of your research, for example, it's okay, but just-, you know, because we would scared that we might, you know, uhm, change our religion because of we attend such ritual."

While these two examples illustrate the concern for the integrity of students' own faith, M10 also shared his concern for others to remain within Islam. In the vignette introduced earlier, he was asked what he thought about a young Muslim meeting with a young Christian from time to time to be friends and also to talk about religion. M10 was rather supportive of the idea and said he would tell the young Muslim man to stay within the proper limits and also to make sure he followed proper Muslim rules, for example, in regard to what to eat and what not. When probed if he was not

concerned that through this contact the young Muslim might be pulled away from his faith, he responded as follows:

> "That will be a big concern. … But we do not expect much from just having relationship that … they want to change to Christian. No. Because, as you say, maybe, they just a regular Muslim and then just a regular Christian. I don't think they have a very-, uhm, talk a lot about the faith and so there is no problem with that. Unless for-, unless they have been talk a lot about religion, this can become a concern for every Muslim, of course."

M02 acknowledged that Muslims with little knowledge about their own faith might be attracted to other religions when they are in a dialogue program and hear representatives of other religions talk about what they believe. There were, he agreed, therefore people who are afraid of interreligious dialogue. Even some of his fellow students feared that participating in dialogue could raise doubts for them about Islam as the true faith. M02, on the other hand, had little concern about that. He said that if you believe to have the truth, there was no need to be afraid. Should doubts arise, these could contribute to reflect more on one's own religion and learn more about it.

4.4.1.2 Concerns that dialogue could instigate division

At least five students explicitly raised the point that talking about religion has the potential to cause tensions. Both, M03 and M08 said that it was possible that people engaged in dialogue could "breach the border" or "cross the boundaries"; M06 spoke about "lines that you should not cross." In these cases, the references were in regard to discussing in a manner that could lead to quarrels or fighting or engaging in dialogue in an attitude that could lead to harsh remarks on other religions. M03 and M05 said that in talking about religion, it should be avoided to "hurt" those who belong to other religions and their religious feelings.

While there was a concern among the students that people with little knowledge might instigate trouble and division more easily, the concern for people who have knowledge about their faith was slightly different. M14 commented that scholars would be in a better position to talk about faith with each other even though it would probably

not be possible to completely avoid tensions as can already be seen *within* the Muslim community where different ideas are present. He mentioned Salafists and Sufis as examples. M03 also said that in a planned dialogue session it might be possible to talk about issues that have the potential to create controversy, but in that case, both sides had agreed to it which is different to people in their daily life touching hot issues.

M02, himself involved in many dialogue activities, admitted that often dialogue was "superficial" and "on the surface level" which is often caused by the different religious communities who want to keep their people together and not expose them to too much influence from other religions. However, he continued: "Actually, I do envision, one day, in Malaysia, we do have a debate about religion, but, in a manner[ed] way." He wished for such a debate to be "very disciplined" but then concluded: "But as far I can see, that one is still beyond, it's a long way to go."

4.4.1.3 Concerns about accusations coming from the Muslim community

Seven students mentioned that the Muslim community around those who are engaged in interreligious dialogue can sometimes be critical of what is going on. The range starts with "concerns" by parents and friends that one could convert to Christianity through too intense contact with Christians as in the case of M04. It ends with being investigated by the police's Special Branch as in the case of M02 who said that he was currently under observation because he, with some others, had organized a dialogue event.

According to the students it could happen that if someone had too intensive contact with Christians other Muslims would question whether that person had an intention to convert. M10 said that as long as the relationship with a Christian did not affect his own faith, it would be no problem. However, "if they see that I change, maybe I no longer pray in the mosque, that will be problematic." Sometimes the concerns of other Muslims start much earlier, as M03 said. He pointed out that even if you meet Christians and talk with them about religious issues in order to improve your knowledge, this could become problematic. The first perception of other Muslims

would be "Are you trying to change your faith? So I need to persuade them: This is only for my knowledge, only for my study purpose." Even then, he said, one might need to produce proof that the conversation was indeed for study purposes.

M11 said that if Muslims see a Muslim going into a church, their first idea is that this person might be in danger to convert, even if he or she only went there to learn more. M15 spoke of a "stigma" in regard to Muslims who wish to go to a church to learn more about Christianity: "Don't go to the church. The Muslim really scared. If you go to the church, you will convert to the Christian." M13 made a similar comment. He said he had been to a church in the UK, but in Malaysia this would be very difficult. He and M02 also mentioned that if images appeared on social media platforms showing a Muslim inside a church building, this would likely have unwanted repercussions. When it happened to him, he was labelled as "liberal," so in all the following events that took place at places of worship they prohibited the taking of pictures.

M13 said that Muslims engaged in interreligious dialogue are in danger of being accused of "promoting religious pluralism." In the accusation of being liberal or to promote pluralism, the focus here being not on the individual, but on what is happening to Islam as a religion.

M11, in his elaborations on the topic said that Muslims in Malaysia had a tendency to "conserve" and wanted "to protect the Muslims." This is in line with the statements made by other students referred to above. M02 showed understanding for the concerns of the religious institutions. He said that he understood "the mind-set of these religious institutions: They want to keep together the Muslim community."

4.4.1.4 Signals coming from the Christian community: Christians consider Islam to be a violent religion and they do not respect the special status given to Islam in Malaysia

Two questions in the interview guide inquired into whether Muslims see any obstacles coming from the Christian community for deeper relationships and more dialogue. The emphasis here was on perception, not on experiences (although experiences may have contributed to their perceptions). Question 8 read: "If you could

change one thing about how Christians perceive of/think of Christians, what would it be? Is there anything that you think Muslims always get wrong about Muslims and their faith?" Question 9 read: "What is something on the side of Christians that you perceive as a hindrance to good relationships between Muslims and Christians; something that makes relationship and dialogue more difficult?"

While a good number of students could not think of any problems Christians cause for the relationship with Muslims, those answers given to the two questions, plus comments gleaned from other passages in the interviews, can be grouped into two big themes. The first has to do with the assumption of Islam being perceived by Christians as a violent religion which is often associated with terrorism. Related to this is the idea that Muslims want to spread their faith by force. A few quotations can serve to illustrate this point. M03 said: "We quite sad and sometimes we get angry when people relate the aggressiveness action, or the brutal action, terrorism action with the Islam, because that's not [what] we are actually." M05 said what she wanted to change in the mind of Christians was "Islamophobia, about Muslims are having war, war, war all the time." Islamophobia was also mentioned by two other students as a problem; one of them said that non-Muslims often form their ideas about Islam based on Western sources and often think about Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia: "Oh, Islamic country, like the Saudi behead people and then the non-Muslim also will be punished." This, he said, is the source of Islamophobia. When M04 was asked what she would like to change in the mind of Christians about their perceptions of Muslims, she said: "the term *kafir*. …, the non-Muslim. So it [is] related with the terrorist, when they say that we are jihadists …. When we face non-Muslim, we have to kill them, we have … hatred on them." M07 made a similar comment, saying that according to her perception, Christians think that Muslims needed to kill them because they were infidels. Both assumptions, she stated, were incorrect. While M03 said that Muslims of course wanted to spread their faith, he made it equally clear that the perception by Christians that Muslims wanted to use force to bring them into Islam was false. Love and care, he affirmed, were the motivating factors for the intention to spread the faith.

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The second theme is that Christians do not show enough respect for Islam's elevated position in Malaysia and that they sometimes act in a way that disrespects the boundaries set for other religions but Islam. M11 gently referred to that by saying: "As for me, every religion in Malaysia should feel thankful, because they have the freedom of expression of their religions. So they should appreciate that space and the opportunities that were given. So, I think, in the meantime, they also have to respect and they have to accept that the constitutional religion in this country is Islam, because the majority of the people in here [belong to] Islam." M13 referred to the restriction Christians needed to understand that they could not use the world Allah for God in their Bible translations. He also referred to an incident where Christians from outside Malaysia were openly distributing Bibles. Such actions, he said, are not good for the relationships between Muslims and Christians in the country. In regard to Christians not respecting the boundaries set for them by the constitution, issues of propagation and attempted conversion was mentioned most often by the Muslim students. M13 also mentioned that there are some Christian groups in Malaysia (he mentioned Evangelicals) who were "very dangerous for the Muslims, because their aim not want to [be/live?] together, but their aim to convert the Muslim."

M10 made a lengthy statement that is worth to be quoted here. At the beginning he mentioned that his information came from a book issued by the religious authorities. He said:

> "Christians have their own agenda, missionary. That have been done for a long time, secretly. So, they showed us, what they want is to have a very strong, uhm, Christian community, instead of-, or having a very strong Christian mission … to spread their faith and their teachings to the Muslim community… Maybe the Christian leaders, they have their own themes and machineries to do their agenda, which is to spread their teaching in the Muslim community, especially when they … see opportunities to attract what kind of Muslim they can bring to Christians, such as the poor community, so when they help them, they see: oh, Christianity is better than Islam. … This is, I can say, what Christians do. … So, from there, I can see that this kind of things can make the Muslim community as well as the Muslim leaders to take an action. That action will be, to maybe to stop Christianity itself or not having Christians in Malaysia. So that is not good as well. … So what I wanted to say is: So who starts this kind of quarrelling and tense between the relationship,

uhm, the relationship between Muslim and Christianity? Is it the Muslims or … the Christians?"

For him, the answer to the question posed at the end, was quite obvious.

4.4.1.5 Summary

Concerns and issues that hinder dialogue exist. There are different facets. When people of different religions come together, it is possible that a person could be attracted to the other religion. Some people draw their own boundaries of what they can take part in and what not rather narrowly; often the boundaries are also drawn for them by religious authorities. People with limited knowledge are seen in greater danger to change their religion – something those in charge usually want to prevent. They are also seen as more likely to cause unwanted divisions or quarrels when they talk with others about religion.

Those who participate in dialogue make themselves vulnerable of being seen as interested in moving away from Islam or as being labelled as liberal or promoting pluralism, as a number of students have mentioned and partly also experienced themselves.

As the last point in the discussion has illustrated, not for all, but in the eyes of the majority of Muslim students, the relationship between Islam and Christianity – or between Muslims and Christians – is not free of false perceptions and prejudices by Christians (seeing Islam as a violent religion) and with experiences, or at least the perception that what Christians in the country do is not always conducive for good relationships and better dialogue (not respecting the boundaries set for them).

4.4.2 The Christian Perspective

According to the statements made by the Christian students, reasons for Christians to be hesitant in forming deeper relationships and engage in dialogue abound. Almost all revolve around the issue that it is illegal in Malaysia to propagate the Christian faith to Muslims. But it is worthwhile to look into the variations of this issue in more detail. It is to be noted at the outset that the students not always made a clear

distinction between having a friendly relationship with a Muslim, talking about faith or even sharing the Christian faith with someone else when commenting about the difficulties in being together with other people who follow another religion that they, just like the Christians, take seriously.

4.4.2.1 The overall socio-religious climate

The Christian students expressed in various ways that the socio-religious climate in Malaysia is not conducive for people of different faith to have deeper relationships that can also include sharing more about one's own faith or religion. Some described Muslims and especially some religious or political leaders with the terms "defensive" (C02), "trying to protect their people" (C07), "control-driven" (C09), or "afraid of Christians" (C11). In the perspective of the Christian students this attitude is seen as a hindrance for relaxed Christian-Muslim relationships.

Another point that was mentioned is the impression to be marginalized by the introduction of laws that have their roots in Islam. C06 and C07 mentioned the discussion about the introduction of *hudud* laws and C12 said he did not want to see the Shariah or *halal* regulations be imposed on non-Muslims.

There are other issues that give Christians odd feelings in regard to being very open and getting close to Muslims. C01 mentioned politicians who tell Muslims not to buy from non-Muslims or not to wish Christians "merry Christmas." C13 said that there is always someone making unfitting comments about Christian celebrations. He also said that he found it odd when a Muslim lady (who met him as the assistant of a lawyer) said she could not shake hands with him. C12 mentioned that being called "infidels" by Muslims causes distortions and problems. He went so far to say that relationships with people of other religions apart from Muslims (e.g., Buddhists), were easier because there was no "preconceived idea of hatred" – thus indicating how he considers the impression he has about the relationship between the Christian and Muslim communities on the large scale. C08 made a similar comment, saying: "I always think they are against us." C05 said that Muslim leaders sometimes talk badly about

Christians on social media which then circulates quickly. C03 reported how a Muslim lady said to a friend of his who had helped her community: "You are not as bad as our imam says." He concluded that the imam must have said something quite negative about Christians.

The points mentioned illustrate that many of the Christian students have the impression that in Malaysian society it is probably better not to make one's Christian faith a prominent factor in relationships with Muslims. The following point adds to this general impression.

4.4.2.2 Concerns for one's own and the Christian community's safety

The law that prohibits the spread of the Christian faith among Muslims in Malaysia has implications for how Christians think of meeting with Muslims. All Christian students referred to it in one way or the other. On one side there is an underlying caution Christians have when it comes to interactions about religion. A comment by C13 illustrates that well:

> "Generally, what we tell them is: Be friends with everybody. Even, whenever they have any functions, if they invite you, go! Don't cut yourself off from the society, la, wherever they are. But then when it comes to the matter of faith, sometimes we have to be prudent, la. That one also I tell them. One is: Make sure they know what they are talking about. Don't go and tell the wrong thing and embarrass us. Two is: you must remember whether the other person, is it asking out of curiosity or with an impure motive. If the motive of intention is to gather information just to attack us later, then I say: You have to be careful."

Different words were used to describe the potentiality of unwanted outcomes of relations with Muslims. C05, for example, said that if he were in charge of a congregation he would encourage them to be friends with Muslims, also to work together for the good of society, and to talk about ordinary things. However, in regard to religious issues, he said: "You know what the risk is. You know about the risk." C02 said that he encouraged Christians to engage in conversations with Muslims but, he said: "I don't want them to be trapped." C11 said that a young Muslim was attending church for some time and the congregation was afraid, telling him "they may be sending

spies." C13 reported a similar experience. When a Muslim attended their worship service, his congregation said they could be accused of trying to convert the Muslim person present. C03 spoke of a wedding ceremony at a church that was attended by some Muslims. He said that "a slight fear" was present among the Christians as religion was a sensitive issue, especially when it comes to the relation between Christians and Muslims. In addition to words like "motive," "intention," "risk," "trap" and "spying," students also mentioned that Muslims could have "an agenda" (C02, C07), of course perceived as a malevolent agenda by the Christians. The concern to run into difficulties through contact with Muslims was also expressed by C04. When asked whether she, as a future Christian scholar, would actively approach a Muslim scholar to speak about issues of religion, she clearly declined. "I might end up like Pastor Koh," she said.[278]

4.4.2.3 Concern that deeper contact with Muslims could be interpreted as illegal attempts to convert Muslims

A concern mentioned by at least six students is that intensive contact with a Muslim, especially when religious topics are not excluded from conversations, could be interpreted as an attempt to win the Muslim for the Christian faith. When asked whether he would approach a Muslim scholar for conversations about religion and faith, C02 responded: "I love to do that as well, but then, looking into this country context, Simon, so, and knowing these people, they can twist, you know, oh, Christian scholar is coming to convert me. And then, that's it. I'm gone." C05 said that even if he treated people with deep respect and wanted to do good from all his heart, "when they see it, ... they will thinks that: You are trying to show that your good is –, because you want to take opportunity to convert us." C07 said that in such relationships, it is also the question what the motive is from "people who are looking from the outside." C13 remarked that sometimes Muslims come to him (in his function as pastor) and ask for help in their physical needs. He helps them but also asks them: "Please don't come here often because others might misunderstand that we want to convert you."

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[278] Pastor Koh was abducted in February 2017 and has remained missing ever since.

4.4.2.4 Signal coming from the Muslim community: They always want to convert us

When asked what they would like to change, if they could, about how Muslims think about Christians and their faith, four students mentioned issues concerning the Trinity or the beliefs about Jesus being God. But the answer given most, in fact by half of the students, was that they had the impression that Muslims think Christians always wanted to evangelize them or make attempts for them to convert – a perception the Christian students find unwarranted.

C07 put it this way: "I think that they think that whenever a Christian talks to them, the Christian wants to evangelize them. I would like that to be erased from their minds." She added that in her perception not all Muslims think like this, but certain segments of the Muslim community do. C02 said that he wished for Muslims to believe "that we really love them," but sometimes they thought the "hidden agenda" of Christians was to convert them. C03 said that he felt that Muslims sometimes perceive that "every good that Christians do is try to convert people and to believe in Christianity."

Both, C02 and C03, as well as many others did not deny that they wished for others, including Muslims, to become Christians. But they denied that their relationship, their love and good deeds are solely a means to an end. They want their actions to be understood as genuine expression of their faith. C13, when asked what Muslims perceive falsely about Christians, answered emphatically: "Conversion! Because they always believe that we are trying to convert them, which is not true." He then added that "honestly" people in his denomination, were "not going after anybody! They don't even go after their [own] children when they leave the church!"

4.4.2.5 Concern for Muslims and acceptance of the laws

In some of the interviews the Christian students mentioned that it could have negative repercussion for Muslims to come close to Christians or, in the extreme, to convert to Christianity. When asked how her Christian friends would react to her having a good Muslim friend, C10 responded by saying that her concern or question would be

whether her Muslim friend's friends or leaders would be fine with that close relationship with her as a Christian. C12 said, in the context of speaking about the Christian faith with people of other religions, that "we are bound by the law" and that if Muslims converted to Christianity, "they will be persecuted, they will be ostracized, they have to leave their country." C08 also pointed out that it is illegal for a Muslim to convert and that therefore Christians would not "spread the gospel to them."

As the examples show, the combination of knowing the law (with all that it entails for the Christian community), plus the knowledge that there are boundaries for Muslims set by the law and others by the community, lead some Christians to the conclusion that to form deeper relationships and to have conversations about faith with Muslims is something that is rather not advisable.

4.4.2.6 Summary

The legal norms in relation to religion are, according to the Christian students, the main obstacle for deeper relationships and more dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The mentioned aspects have different weight for different students. For many, the socio-religious climate signals them that they, as a religious minority, should keep religion their private affair and better keep quiet about it. Some are reluctant in actively investing in relationships and dialogue with Muslims out of fear for safety. Many want to avoid anything that could be interpreted as an attempt to win Muslims for the Christian faith – a concern they justify, among other reasons, with the impression they have that many Muslims think Christians had the agenda to convert Muslims. The acceptance of the law and not wanting to bring Muslims in a difficult situation is a factor that adds another perspective to the issue.

While a few of the Christian students have good contacts with Muslims, many hesitate to engage in deep relationships and are even more hesitant concerning everything that entails conversations about religion and faith. The tendency is rather to be more cautious than to bring oneself and others in a difficult situation.

4.4.3 Comparison

The obstacles and hindrances to deeper relationships and more dialogue differ when the responses from the Muslim students are compared with those of the Christian students. For Muslim students, the concern to misrepresent one's own faith and to overstep boundaries set by Islam takes a much more prominent role than they do for Christians. For the Christian students, there were very few comments made in regard to boundaries set by their religion itself.

In addition, the Muslim students did not want to instigate divisions and create tensions through relationships and dialogue with Christians and they were also concerned about accusations that could come from their own community. For the Christian students almost all concerns centered on the status of Christians in the country; especially the need to be cautious in how religion is practiced and talked about, in order to shield oneself from trouble and accusations.

The perspective of Islam as the privileged religion in Malaysia and Christianity as one of the minority religions has become obvious in this section. While Muslims expect Christians to respect the limits set for them by the constitution and other laws, and see these boundaries overstepped at some points, Christians feel that Muslims sometimes accuse them too quickly of proselytizing or, at least, fear that Muslims *could* accuse them of doing so.

4.5 Openness and Interest

This section will look into students' stated openness and interest in relationships and dialogue with those of the other religion. The longer part will describe the results from the questionnaire and the statements made in the interviews concerning their own openness and interest; a shorter part will look into how they, as (future) leaders, scholars and people with influence in the Muslim and Christian communities would encourage others to be involved and what advice they would give them for their contact with people of the other religion.

4.5.1 The Openness and Interest of Muslim Students

In the questionnaire, questions 22-27 asked directly about the interest students have in certain activities that expose them to and connect them with people of the other religion. In addition, questions 13 and 14 in the interview guide asked how open they were to meet with a scholar or clergy of the other religion to read and talk about the Qur'an and the Bible and whether they would also take the initiative to engage in such conversations. Question 15 asked about the advice they would give to others concerning the building of relationships and talking about religion. The presentation will start with the Muslim students again with the same outline used for the Christian students later.

4.5.1.1 Interest in Various Activities

The following block of questions in the questionnaire was introduced with the instruction to indicate how much students were interested in the listed activities. The table shows the results:

Table 4.9: Muslim students, questions 22-26 (survey)

	Very much interested	Quite interested	Would have to think about it	Not so much interested	Not interested
22. Visiting a church building	7	7	2	0	0
	87.5%		12.5%	0.0%	
23. Being present at a church service	5	7	3	1	0
	75.0%		18.8%	6.3%	
24. Attending a conference about Muslim-Christian dialogue	13	3	0	0	0
	100.0%		0.0%	0.0%	
25. Working together with Christians in social projects	10	6	0	0	0
	100.0%		0.0%	0.0%	
26. Going on a weekend camp with Muslim and Christian students; sharing life	10	6	0	0	0
	100.0%		0.0%	0.0%	

The answers clearly indicate that the Muslim students are interested in a whole variety of activities with Christians. Those activities that involved a sharing of life and service to others and the attendance of a conference about dialogue got 100% positive responses. It should be noted that when question 26 was read to the students, "talking with each other" was purposely mentioned as one aspect of such a camp and still all participants in the survey indicated that they were "very much interested" or "quite interested." The figures for the visit to a church and being present at a church service were a little bit lower; especially the "very much interested" responses were less for these two questions. Still, 87.5% and 75.0% answered the questions in the affirmative.

In this context it is interesting to note that apart from those Muslims who already had connections with Christians, two others explicitly mentioned that they wished they had a Christian friend, but didn't. In M07's words: "If you ask me about friends from Christianity, I don't have any friend. Because, firstly, maybe because of my environment. … I used to school in religious school and then I study in Shariah, so, you know, it's totally different, so I do not have any expose to those environment and so, for me: I want to have a Christian friend, actually, but I do not have any opportunity." M15 made a very similar statement. While some – not all – Muslim students do have Christian friends and acquaintances, these two were longing to have a relationship with Christians. M05 did not mention this same longing, but she still said that she should have more interaction with people of other religion because her religion told her so.

4.5.1.2 Interested in Conversations about Religion?

The presentation of the last question in the questionnaire had been spared so far. It aimed at finding out to what extent the students, all of them knowledgeable in their faith due to their studies, would be interested in meeting with a Christian leader (a priest, a Christian scholar) to talk about issues of religion and faith.

Table 4.10: Muslim students, question 27 (survey)

	Very much interested	Quite interested	Would have to think about it	Not so much interested	Not interested
27. Getting together with a Christian leader to speak about issues of religion and faith	10	5	1	0	0
	93.8%		6.3%	0.0%	

Just as for the other activities described in the previous section, the responses were very much leaning to the "interested" side of the continuum. The results are confirmed and should be read together with the comments made to question 13 in the question guide for the interviews. The question was introduced as follows: "Let's say, a Christian scholar (or a priest) suggested meeting with you once a week to read and discuss passages from the Qur'an and the Bible, how would you respond?" All 16 students mentioned that they would agree to the suggestion of the Christian scholar and be willing to meet.

The way this was expressed, was different. M05 said it was "okay" to meet, although she felt a little bit insecure and said she might ask someone to accompany her. M11 said that he was "open," but also "careful," because he was not exactly sure what the Christian's purpose was. M07 said that she was "okay with it, if I have time" and M15 said that she thought this was "a good suggestion" and she would agree to it.

Others were almost excited. M10's response was that he would "readily agree" and M06's spontaneous reaction was: "Let's do it! … I'd be glad to do it!" M13 said he would be "keen to discuss."

Half of the students mentioned that they were interested in "learning more" or that such a gathering was for "sharing knowledge" or to "understand" the other person's religion better. Some stressed this point much, like M11who said: "I will appreciate if the conversation is in the term of knowledge. … More than that [i.e., if it goes beyond that – S.H.], I think … I have to be careful." M10 said such a gathering should be about "academic purposes." It might help to discover similarities in the two religions as they

are related to each other. At various other points in the interviews, students expressed interest in understanding Christian teachings better, while clarifying at the same time that these conversations were not about considering Christianity for personal adoption. M04, who regularly meets with a Christian to read the Bible, mentioned that she once had a conversation with a Christian priest who made comments she understood as a hint for her to convert. She clearly didn't welcome this approach and made it clear that the purpose of her conversation with the priest was solely to share information about the religions and to come to a better knowledge and understanding.

M03 stressed the need to learn while warning of a discussion that could lead to strife:

> "If you want just to discuss about al-Qur'an and Bible for the purpose to understanding these books, is okay for me. But if you try to make a comparison in purpose to oppose, for me … there is a boundary. If you want to-, any conversation, any discussion is trying to understanding. Is not for-, is not trying to who are right, who are wrong. Because you as Christian, of course you feel you are right. I as Muslim, of course I feel Islam is right. There is no solution for that. … But if you are trying to understand each other, this is a good way, because if I understanding Christian better, so I have a guide how to treat my friend from the Christian."

So while the Muslim students were very open for conversations on a scholarly level, they were also mindful to keep the conversation focused on increasing knowledge and understanding.

4.5.1.3 Initiating a Conversation with a Christian leader?

Following the question how students would respond to the suggestion of a Christian scholar to meet, the next one (question 14 in the interview guide) turned the situation around: "How would you respond if I suggested to you that you could go and approach a Christian scholar who lives nearby, and suggest to her or him to meet for reading and talking about the Qur'an and the Bible?" This suggestion was met with more reluctance than it was the case for the previous scenario.

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There was a small majority of students who said that they would take this step. Six of the students said they could do that with no further qualifications, others, however, mentioned concerns they had.

Only three students gave a relatively clear "no" to the suggestion. What sticks out is the huge number of students who gave reasons why this would be a difficult thing to do. The most common reason was the assumption or concern that Christians would not accept such a proposal. Not everyone went to the same extent as M07 who said that she wouldn't know the Christian scholar's response and: "I'm afraid that she will throw something to me!" M01 simply said: "I think they would not accept us." This was similar to M13 who said that maybe the Christian scholar had prejudices and would think: "Why this Muslim come to my house, my door?" He said that these prejudices existed in both directions. M09 said: "I think about it. … I hesitate about her reaction. If she would receive that or if she will reject me."

Apart from not knowing how the Christian person would respond, some other reasons for the hesitance to take the first step were mentioned: M05 said that, because she had no training in interreligious dialogue, the dialogue might not turn out well. M11 said he was a shy person and that it was not part of his personality to approach others in that way. M03 mentioned that he was not concerned in meeting with the Christian leader per se, but did not know what other Muslims would think about it and M13 said he would not like to make the Christian leader feel uncomfortable by being approached by him.

To conclude this point, three students (M10, M11 and M13) said it would be easier to establish a relationship with the Christian first. If they had already done so, it might make talking about religion easier.

4.5.1.4 Advice provided to others

Question 15 in the interview guide asked for the advice the students as (future) leaders and scholars in the Muslim community would give to ordinary Muslims in regard to participating in dialogue and engaging in relationships with Christians.[279]

None of the students was against such relationships in general. To the contrary, they said that good relationships were something to be welcomed. Some students would encourage ordinary Muslims to emphasize the relationships with Christians over talking about religious issues. Said M12: "In term of faith, maybe he can refer to much knowledgeable person. But let the friendship go on." However, if people were taught about their own faith first and also about how to interact with people of other faith, he saw it possible to talk about religious issues to some extent. This aspect, that people should have a good basic understanding of their own faith in order to have a conversation with a Christian that also includes elements of faith and religion, was made by half of the students.

Four students (M01, M02, M09, and M12) suggested to involve scholars or leaders or offered themselves to be available if questions arose through the conversations of the lay Muslim with the lay Christian. By giving advice or pointing out some conditions under which they would encourage ordinary Muslims to engage in such relationships and dialogue, they also showed that involving someone like them with a lot of knowledge about Islam is something recommendable.

4.5.1.5 Should Muslims and Christians inform others about their religion?

One last aspect concerning the openness of students in the area of Muslim-Christian relations needs to be discussed here. In Question 11 and 12 of the survey, students were asked if there should be events where Muslim and Christian congregations should invite others to come and learn more about their religion. Answers to the two questions are shown in the following table:

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[279] The vignette has been introduced and the part of the analysis that deals with the question whether talking about religion was a good thing and whether ordinary Muslims should be involved, has been discussed in section 4.3.1.6.

	Totally agree	Rather agree	Not sure	Rather disagree	Disagree
11. <u>Mosques/Muslim congregations</u> should have events where they invite people of other faith, including Christians, to come and learn more about Islam.	15	1	0	0	0
	100.0%		0.0%	0.0%	
12. <u>Churches/Christian congregations</u> should have events where they invite people of other faith, including Muslims, to come and learn more about Christianity	9	6	1	0	0
	93.8%		6.3%	0.0%	

While it might not be surprising to see Muslim students support the idea that mosques or Muslim congregations offer such events (15 out of 16 students answered with "totally agree"), it is noteworthy that all but one student were open for Christians to do the same. Even the one who answered "not sure" made a comment that personally she would agree for such events to take place but because the law prohibits propagation to Muslims, and she wanted to be a good citizen who respects the law, she could not.

4.5.1.6 Summary

All Muslim students in the research indicated that they were interested to participate in a conference about dialogue, to work with Christians in social projects or to go on a camp with them. The interest to visit a church or to be present during a church service was a little bit lower, but still very high. In addition, all (interviews) or almost all (survey) students were open to meeting with a Christian scholar if that person approached them with the suggestion to read the Qur'an and the Bible together, as long as the purpose was to increase knowledge and understanding. Taking the initiative and proposing this to a Christian scholar would be more difficult for many of the Muslim students; mainly because they were unsure how the Christian person would respond.

In their (future) role as people in the Muslim community others look up to for advice, they would generally support relationships of Muslims with Christians, but would require that those who talk about religion have a good basic understanding of their own faith. When asked if Muslim and Christian congregations should have occasions where they invite others to learn more about their religion, the responses were almost unanimously on the affirmative side.

4.5.2 The Openness and Interest of Christian Students

The outline for the discussion of Christians' interest in deeper relationships and more dialogue will follow the same outline as the previous section and will be based on the same questions in the survey and the question guide.

4.5.2.1 Interest in Various Activities

The results from the survey in regard to the interest in different activities are shown in the following table:

Table 4.12: Christian students, questions 22-26 (survey)

	Very much interested	Quite interested	Would have to think about it	Not so much interested	Not interested
22. Visiting a mosque	6	5	0	3	0
	78.6%		0.0%	21.4%	
23. Being present at a Friday Prayer	3	7	3	1	0
	71.4%		21.4%	7.1%	
24. Attending a conference about Christian-Muslim dialogue	10	2	2	0	0
	85.7%		14.3%	0.0%	
25. Working together with Muslims in social projects	9	5	0	0	0
	100.0%		0.0%	0.0%	
26. Going on a weekend camp with Christian and Muslim students; sharing life[280]	7	4	2	0	0
	84.6%		15.4%	0.0%	

The figures indicate clearly that a high number of Christian students is open for activities that involve Christians and Muslims. All students showed interest of working together with Muslims in social projects and while attending a conference and going on a camp received affirmative answers from around 85% each, no student indicated that they were not interested. If they did not answer in the positive, they at least would "think about it."

The two activities that have to do with actually going to a mosque for either a visit or the observation of Friday prayer received a few "not so much interested"-responses (without further explanation), but the vast majority of Christian students (78.6% and 71.4% respectively) were still interested in participating in such an activity.

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[280] One student chose not to answer this question. Percentages were calculated from those students who answered the question.

4.5.2.2 Interested in Conversations about Religion?

In regard to their openness to meet with a Muslim leader to talk about religious issues, more than three quarters of the students indicated that they would be interested in such an activity as indicated in this table:

Table 4.13: Christian students, question 27 (survey)

	Very much interested	Quite interested	Would have to think about it	Not so much interested	Not interested
27. Getting together with a Muslim leader to speak about issues of religion and faith	5	6	1	0	2
	78.6%		7.1%	14.3%	

When the students were asked in the interview how they would respond if an Imam or a Muslim scholar approached them and asked if they could meet to talk and to read the Qur'an and the Bible together, all students said that they were open to this suggestion with various levels of excitement. Some made qualifying comments as will be illustrated shortly.

There were two students who in the survey answered they were not interested in such an activity, but in the interview they gave a seemingly conflicting answer. When asked directly, C09 said that he answered "not interested" in the survey because of his background as a Christian who converted from Islam. "I know the rules of Islam. If it is a good, ehm, Muslim, and a good Muslim leader, he knows that because I left Islam, ehm, it puts my life in danger. … If they are a good Muslims, I should be careful. If they are bad Muslims, I'd love it [laughs]." C08 said that she had doubts if she was able to explain the Bible well to a Muslim, but that in general she would be happy to meet. She also mentioned that she might refer to a lecturer or bring him along if that was helpful.

The responses given by the Christian students can be roughly grouped into those who are willing to meet, but are also cautious, think twice or have questions about the

genuineness of the Muslim scholar's concern. The other group, of about equal size, did not mention any hesitation at all and was excited to meet.

An example for the first group is C12. He said that he would ask his church board for advice first. Questioned further what he would do if the church board left the decision to him, he said, after thinking for a while: "Would I be interested? Yah, sure. Why not?" C03 is another example. His response was: "Yes, why not?" But he then added that he would ask the Muslim: "Is it safe for me to share Bible with you? That's the concern. But if he is inviting, then, sure, why not?" C01, who has good relationships with Muslims, would still hesitate to respond positively to such an invitation. He "would rather get to know him first before we talk about faith. I have to be very careful also, because of things that's happen in my country." His concern would be "whether he is genuine." Building a relationship first would be a prerequisite for him to talk about issues of faith and religion. C07 said that she would be open to the suggestion of the Muslim scholar. When questioned if she didn't have any suspicions she said: "I think I will try once. I'm quite a discerning person."

An example for the other group is C13. His response was: "I'd say 'Hallelujah'[281] and go!" C10 said: "I will be totally open for that. I'll be really excited!" C06 replied: "No problem! Any time!" He said the minimum outcome would be to understand each other better and live together well. The maximum outcome could be to find one's "calling" as he called it. As a former Hindu who became a Christian long into his adulthood, he advocates for meeting others with an open mind. C11, to mention a last example, said: "I will be very great joy and happy to welcome him and I am willing to go to his place if he invite me to have this dialogue. I'm very much interested and I love that to have this kind of fruitful dialogue with the Muslims." Questioned if he would not have any suspicions he said that he would not worry about it. Instead, he would always welcome those who wanted to know more about Christ and would share his faith with them.

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[281] A joyful exclamation often used by Christians, meaning "God be praised!"

4.5.2.3 Initiating a Conversation with a Muslim leader?

The responses were distinctly different when the Christian students were asked if they would also take the initiative and actively approach a Muslim leader or scholar. The most positive response, a "Why not!?" came from C06. All others were more reluctant. Some students (C02, C03) said that they would not take such a direct approach but would try to build a relationship first, talk about the community, meet to have a cup of coffee first, etc. C07 and C14 said that if there was a clear purpose, like carrying out research, they would take the initiative; otherwise they would have no intention to do so. C05 said he would think about it "a thousand times" and "would be shaking" if he did this. He then said such conversations are better placed in official programs. C10 and C11 questioned if the Muslims they approached would be open for it. C09 also said he would not take the initiative. He affirmed that such conversations were important but because of his background as a convert from Islam "it may not be very friendly" to initiate such a conversation. The clearest "no" came from C04 and C12 who clearly said they could not see themselves in a position to initiate such a conversation with a Muslim leader.

The main reason mentioned for the reluctance stated by the Christian students is connected with the legal situation: a fear that such an active approach would not be welcome by the Muslim community and lead to negative consequences. Beyond this, a few other reasons were also given: C08 mentioned scarcity of time. C07 responded by stating: "That's not me. I don't function that way" and also, that taking such an initiative would not follow "our normal life's consensus." As mentioned above, C10 and C11 were not sure how the Muslims would respond which gave them reason not to be overly excited in approaching them.

4.5.2.4 Advice provided to others

When asked what advice they would give to young Christians who think about meeting with a Muslim more often, all Christian students said they would generally encourage them to go ahead, especially if the first gathering went well.

Four of the 14 students would not give any additional advice. C04 said that she encourages the young people in her youth group to take such steps: "I am glad that they are willing to … go out of their comfort zone." C14 commented that she would encourage the young Christian woman "to continue the friendship, yah, to reach out as a friend, and ehm, and see where it takes her." She added: "I would encourage her to know her as a person, as a friend, as a person and not just as a Muslim; ehm, that is, to give value to that person." C06 and C09, both converts to Christianity, referred multiple times to how important it was to have an open mind. While definitely encouraging such relationships and conversations, both would also remind young Christians to be mindful when exploring other religions that it is difficult to leave Islam should they decide to join the religion.

Some of the Christian students would, while encouraging the young Christians to engage in such relationships, add some more counsel. C01, for example, said, the young Christian should not enter into a debate. He also said that he would tell him not to come to the conclusion "that the other side is more true than my faith," if difficult questions arose in a conversation to which the young Christian had no answer. Similarly, C02 who was also supportive of such a relationship, added: "I don't want them to be trapped. … They might fall the other side." C07 said "the fact that she came asking me whether she should continue or not shows me that she is aware of certain possibilities." She would not at all hinder her from continuing with the relationship but tell her to be cautious. C13 also said a young Christian should be prudent and take in the possibility that someone asks with an "impure motive." Notwithstanding the concerns mentioned, none of the Christian students said such relationships should be avoided.

Two comments were made repeatedly. First, four students mentioned that if the young people wanted to talk about religion and faith, they should be knowledgeable in the Christian faith. C02 said he would give this piece of advice: "Know your Bible before you quote. So, ultimately: Equip yourself!" C13 put it this way: "Make sure you know what you are talking about! Don't go and tell the wrong thing and embarrass us!"

The second comment that was made by more than half of the Christian students is that these young people could always come back to them or someone else in the church with a good knowledge of the Christian faith if they encountered any difficulties in the conversation. C10 said that he could do a role-play to prepare someone for questions that could arise in a conversation with a Muslim friend. C02 said he would help to equip a young Christian to meet with a Muslim.

4.5.2.5 Should Christians and Muslims inform others about their religion?

When the Christian students were asked how open they would be for the idea of Christian and Muslim congregations to offer events where they invite others and inform them about their religion, the following was their response:

Table 4.14: Christian students, questions 11+12 (survey)

	Totally agree	Rather agree	Not sure	Rather disagree	Disagree
11. <u>Churches/Christian congregations</u> should have events where they invite people of other faith, including Muslims, to come and learn more about Christianity	7	5	0	1	1
	85.7%		0.0%	14.3%	
12. <u>Mosques/Muslim congregations</u> should have events where they invite people of other faith, including Christians, to come and learn more about Islam.	8	4	1	1	0
	85.7%		7.1%	7.1%	

Almost all answers were on the affirmative side. The reason for C08 to answer question 11 with "disagree" was not that she was not interested in it but that it was not

allowed.[282] C14 thought for a long time and answered both questions with "rather disagree." After having answered question 12, she made the following comment: "My answers is due to the fact, eh, that in our country, it is not encouraged for us to try to convert other people to our religion, so I think that's at the back of my mind when I am thinking about this." At the end of the interview, when asked why she answered questions concerning events where providing information about one's religion was in the focus on the basis of the prohibition to try to win over Muslims to the Christian faith, she answered:

> "I am not saying that the church wants to convert others, but it is how is perceived by others. So I'm more concerned about how this event would be perceived. … We may have a good motive, wanting to just talk, eh, but others may perceive that we are trying to do this, you know. … My concern is how others would perceive this event in the church."

Even with these comments in mind, the answers to the questions make it clear that a vast majority of Christian students is open to and supports the idea of both Christian and Muslim congregations to have events where they invite others to learn more about their religion.

4.5.2.6 Summary

The overall picture gathered from the survey and the interview shows that the Christian students are very open to doing things together with Muslims and even to talk about religion and faith. They also mentioned the concerns they had when thinking about particular aspects of relationships and dialogue with Muslims.

All Christians indicated that they were interested in working with Muslims in social projects. Going on a camp with them and attending a conference about dialogue received roughly 85% positive responses. The interest in visiting a mosque and being present during Friday prayer ranked a bit lower, but affirmative responses were still above 70% for both activities. In the survey, over ¾ of the students indicated that they are interested in meeting with a Muslim leader to speak about religion and faith; in the

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[282] This simply represents her statement. This is not the place to discuss whether her assessment is correct or not.

interviews all students said so, but some made qualifying comments. The situation was different when the Christian students were asked if they would actively approach a Muslim leader for a conversation on issues of faith and religion. Most would rather not do so, at least not without a concrete purpose. The main reason was that this would carry the potential to be interpreted as reaching out to Muslims in order to share the Christian message with them.

When asked what kind of advice they as (future) leaders would give to younger Christians who would like to have close relationships with Muslims, they all generally expressed their support, but while some would freely encourage them to meet and invest in such a relationship, others were more cautious, mentioned the potential risks involved and encouraged them to be firmly rooted in their own faith. A vast majority of Christian students also indicated that they thought it was a good idea for Christian and Muslim congregations to have occasions where they invite others to learn more about their religion.

4.5.3 Comparison

When comparing the results from the two groups, the following points should be noted:

First, no question in the survey regarding activities done together (22-27) received less than 70% of affirmative answers by any of the two groups. This shows a high openness to common activities, including conversations about faith and religion. Attending a conference about dialogue, working together in social projects and going on a camp together were the three activities that ranked highest in both groups.

Second, the Muslim students indicated slightly higher openness in all questions, except for question 25 (the interest in shared social activities) which all students on both sides showed interest in.

Third, in both groups, all students signalled their openness if a leader/scholar from the other side approached them to read the holy books together and talk about faith and religion. However, there was reluctance on both sides to take the first step for such

a conversation. While a slight majority of Muslims said they could see themselves taking the initiative, almost none of the Christian students did so.

Fourth, when asked what they as (future) leaders would recommend younger members of their religion and whether they should engage in friendships and conversations with those of the other religion, all said, it was good to come close to each other. The Muslim students advised that no one should overstep boundaries and that those involved should know their own belief. Christian students also said that Christians should be knowledgeable about their faith and should be mindful that close contact with Muslims could also have undesired consequences. However, none of the students from either side said that contact should be avoided. If they are lived out in an appropriate way, they are welcome.

Fifth, almost all Muslim and Christian students supported the idea of events hosted by the two different religious communities as means for others to learn more about their religion; with Muslim affirmative answers again slightly higher than those of Christian students. When additional comments were made during these questions in the survey they referred to the prohibition of Christians to try to convert others or the concern that such events could be perceived as having this purpose.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the data presented in Chapter 4 will be interpreted; aspects that were previously dealt with separately will be seen together in a synthetic way, set in relation to each other, analysed and interpreted on the basis of pertinent literature. The research questions will be used as reference points and the answers to them will show the contribution this research makes to the field of study. As this analysis will show, the openness, even eagerness of many students to learn more about the other faith cannot be seen in separation from the concerns they have and the background of the society in which dialogue takes place. The interpretation of the data in this chapter will also lay the ground for the next chapter which will outline implications and suggestions for future work.

The presentation of data in Chapter 4 stayed as close as possible to the statements made by the students, often even quoting them. While complete objectivity is epistemologically impossible, the attempt was made to come close to it. This chapter necessarily moves a step further and uses the voice of the author in the interpretation. While interpretations of data can always vary, the aim is to present it in a way that allows readers to comprehend how the data collected from students builds the foundation for the interpretation and draws the lines from data to interpretation in *a* sensible way, even though not the only way possible.

The presentation will take place in the form of eleven theses that are geared towards answering the research question, namely, how the students, as prospective leaders of their faith communities, are engaged and interested in dialogue with adherents of the other religion. Stated in a different way, the chapter evaluates the prospects for dialogue engagement of the students on the basis of their experiences, attitudes and interests, taking into account also the societal factors that impact dialogue. From the field of interreligious dialogue theory, the study of principles for dialogue has been chosen as a guiding framework to interpret the data. Principles are guidelines

underlying actions and conduct. They extend beyond the mere "what" of dialogue to encompass the "how," which must also be considered. An article by Sallie King[283] together with principles laid out by The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID)[284] serve as the main references. As a rough outline, the theses will first go along the four modes of dialogue used in this study, then concentrate more on the conversational part of dialogue and towards the end look into stumbling blocks on the road to successful dialogue.

Thesis 1: For many, getting out of their bubble is a first step required to engage in dialogue at all

The analysis of the data makes it clear that both Muslim and Christian students are not interested in a greater separation than it already exists. They had a wish for deeper relationships and more dialogue. While some students on both sides have good and deep contacts with people of the other faith, there are many students who live in ethnic and religious bubbles and have little personal contact, let alone deep personal contact, with adherents of the other religion. This was nothing the students were looking for; it did not seem that the different life-worlds were intentionally sought. They are a by-product of how their life has led them in regard to the neighbourhoods they grew up or have lived in, choices of education they made (or were made for them), and naturally occurring social contacts and an overall decline in casual gatherings between people of different ethnicities and religions (see Section 4.2).[285] This could be seen among the Christian students but even more clearly among the Muslim students in the study. Opportunities that naturally open up for people to get in contact with those of the other religion do not present themselves in abundance. It is well possible for Muslim students

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[283] Sallie B. King, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad V. Meister (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[284] The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue*, https://www.kaiciid.org/sites/default/files/ird-guide-2021-digital.pdf.

[285] As mentioned in Section 1.7, this research focused on Peninsular Malaysia. The situation in Eastern Malaysia is different. It should also be noted that the situation in Peninsular Malaysia may vary; for example from parts of the West Coast to the North East of Malaysia. To investigate regional differences was outside the scope of this study.

to live without having any meaningful contact with Christians and vice versa. All these aspects are not contributing to religious dialogue to happen freely and naturally.

As a consequence, as a number of the students mentioned, people create perceptions about others that are not based on knowledge and personal relationships. These perceptions have a strong influence on what people in Malaysia think of other religions and their adherents. Without personal contact, one is prone to forming false perceptions, to cultivate biases and live with prejudices about others. C01 mentioned during the interview that Christians are in danger of letting international media determine their perspective of Muslims and Islam in general. M02 remarked that for many religious people, even for the students, knowledge of other religions seems to be very superficial and sometimes also outright false. Many Muslim students have not learned much about other religions during their general education. M08 stated that during her entire time at an Islamic secondary school she "didn't learn about Christians." More than half of the Muslim students (56.3%) indicated that they knew little about Christianity; only one student indicated he knew much about it.

There is also a danger of forming an image about the other religion based on wrong information or impressions. During a Christmas celebration of the German School of Kuala Lumpur, for example, a group of Muslim students was there, witnessing the celebration.[286] While they had difficulties understanding much because the programme was held mostly in German, there was hardly anything to be learned about Christianity from this Christmas celebration. It was a purely cultural event which, probably for reasons of flair or custom, was taking place in a church. To learn more about Christmas and its meaning for Christians, they had better talked to a Christian scholar or pastor than witnessed the school's celebration. But: How could they know? The path to dialogue is stony and there are potholes on the way.[287]

If people want to engage in dialogue, the willingness to learn and to have false perceptions corrected through engaging with an actual person who follows another

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[286] The author was also present.

[287] Nevertheless, there is a way to more dialogue. Chapter 6 presents a number of suggestions for future action.

religion is paramount.[288] There is a long way to go: The literature shows clearly and the students themselves remarked that in order to engage in dialogue, knowledge not only about one's own, but also of the interlocutor's religion, is necessary.[289] But: How do people learn more about other religions if they do not meet with their followers? As some students said, the internet or religious studies courses at university provide avenues to increase one's knowledge and some students mentioned that these means helped them to learn more. However, there is no substitute for personal relationships. To learn more and have real dialogue, there needs to be direct encounters of mature people – a role these students can take over or at least grow into, especially because they know their own religion and are people of faith. This is a good starting point.

Azizan Baharuddin who reflects on a workshop on "Malaysians living together" which was conducted by IKIM, argues that in a society like Malaysia, a consciousness of different people living together requires "cultural literacy." She writes: "How do we build cultural literacy? To begin with, we may be unconscious of our cultural incompetence due to our ignorance… After understanding and accepting our incompetence we should start to learn non-judgementally about 'the other' with the spirit of humane honesty."[290] In order to achieve this, IKIM conducted these workshops and by doing so created a platform for dialogue to grow; a helpful contribution as will be elaborated on in Thesis 7.

What Baharuddin states for small-scale projects with young people in Malaysia holds true also for the big stage. In the dialogue that developed out of the Common Word-Initiative, this same interpersonal encounter is emphasized: "In the end, there is simply no substitute for Muslim and Christian leaders' logging the face-to-face hours

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288 The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue*, 39, states: "By sharing perceptions, and resolving misperceptions when needed, we may discover some new perspectives."

289 King, "Interreligious Dialogue," 106, remarks as one guiding principle: "One should have as much knowledge of the religion of one's dialogue partner as possible."

290 "Dialogue Should Start Early," 27.

necessary to cultivate relationships that go beyond superficial pleasantries. So far as it depends on us, we are committed to making such relationships a reality."[291]

While some of the students had contacts with people of the other religion in the past, some have sporadic and a few regular contacts, there are quite a number who live in what has been described as bubbles. For them to engage in dialogue, it needs a conscious step out of that bubble; a step they might not have to do alone.

Thesis 2: Dialogue of life is a good entry point for dialogue to take place

Throughout this study, students from both sides confirmed that social contacts between neighbours, workmates or sports-partners of the other religion were something positive. Literally none of the students were against such contacts or saw them as problematic from a perspective of faith – to the contrary. They could help for people to understand each other better and to live better with each other. Scholars like Suraya Sintang et al.[292] and Wan Ariffin Wan Yon et al.[293] have pointed out the significance of "dialogue of life" for Malaysia.

This research confirmed that this kind of dialogue – the sharing of life, ordinary, friendly conversations – has a high chance to be successful. Dialogue of life aligns itself well with values like harmony, hospitality and kindness that are widespread in Malaysia. Some of the students live this out like M01 and C01 who both regularly do sports together with friends of the other faith. M08 said she sometimes meets with Christians for celebrations that have no or little religious connotations and C05 had lived with Muslims in the same room during previous studies. They all practice or practiced dialogue of life. However, as the analysis of data in Section 4.1 has shown,

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[291] Saperstein, Andrew, Rick Love, and Joseph Cumming, "Answers to Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Yale Response to 'A Common Word between Us and You'". In *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad and Melissa Yarrington (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 180.

[292] Suraya Sintang, Azizan Baharuddin, and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, "Dialogue of Life and Its Significance in Inter-Religious Relation in Malaysia".

[293] Wan Ariffin Wan Yon et al., "Bridging the Muslim-Christian Relations through Dialogue of Life: Muslim Perspective " *International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research* 5, no. 2 (2011).

there are many students who have no or only very limited contact with those who practice another religion.

Suraya Sintang et al. see dialogue of life as a good way to include "non-elite participants in the inter-religious dialogue at the grass roots level."[294] While this is certainly the case, it should be asked if those who are deeper engaged with their religion by studying it are not sometimes less involved in the day to day interactions and sharing of life with people of other religions. For many of them, life revolves around the university or seminary where they almost exclusively meet people of their own religion. It seems that it would be worthwhile to create opportunities for students of both religions where they can start to share life together. Responses to question 26 in the survey show that all Muslim students and almost all Christian students were interested in "Going on a weekend camp with Muslim and Christian students; sharing life." As mentioned already, the interest is there; it is the opportunities that are rare. Despite the overall optimistic picture drawn by Suraya Sintang et al., the figures presented in Section 2.3.1.3 rather point towards a society where the different ethnic and religious groups move further away from each other which means that it is getting more and more important to actively look for or to create opportunities to enter into dialogue of life.

Thesis 3: Collaboration in social action bears untapped potential for dialogue

Collaboration in social action as a means of dialogue received unreserved support from the students. Sallie King describes the goal of what she terms practical dialogue as "to promote community harmony through people from different communities getting to know one another in a nonthreatening way."[295] In both groups, students said that it would be good to work together. However, only few have done so. Working for the poor, the disadvantaged, disaster relief and the like seem to be carried out either by the government, humanitarian organisations or NGOs and religious

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[294] Suraya Sintang, Azizan Baharuddin, and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, "Dialogue of Life and Its Significance in Inter-Religious Relation in Malaysia", 69.

[295] Sallie B. King, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad V. Meister (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

groups. So people either come together on the basis of being humans (and not first of all as members of their religion), or work within the bounds of their religious groups. It seems that little infrastructure exists for collaboration from religious organizations.

In addition, while many students remarked that their desire to do good was based on their love towards others, their religiously defined duty or the like, and not to lure others into their religion, doing good can still be understood as a practical implication of one's faith and has the character of a testimony to one's faith. Religiously motivated works of compassion or for the benefit of society let a light shine on the religion of those involved.

Religious people who work together from different religions to do good would have to trade this potential benefit for the sake of working together with others, which would, as some students remarked, reduce the risk of being blamed for helping others only to win them for one's own religion. The general willingness to work together was stated by all students. However, most students would probably wonder how it could practically be implemented.

Thesis 4: To observe rituals of the other religion bears the risk for misunderstanding

Many students mentioned how difficult it is for believers to be present during a ritual that is performed as an expression of someone else's religion or simply to visit a mosque or a church. Concerns abound: some students question if this constitutes an overstepping of their own religious boundaries, others fear repercussions from their own religious community or hesitate because they do not know how the other religious community would respond.

For most of those who have experience in observing others expressing their religion in prayer, worship or other rituals, this experience came as part of their studies. Very few occasions were mentioned in the interviews where individual Christians went to a mosque or individual Muslims were present during a church service. It seems it

would make most people feel uncomfortable to do so and it is better done in groups and in a somehow organized way.[296]

It can therefore be concluded: If on one side the interest in a form of dialogue is there, but on the other side the reluctance is also very high due to various factors, it is important to create "safe space" or a safe environment where persons limit the risk to be blamed for having done something inappropriate.[297] Official programs, doing things in groups, being part of an organization or having an influential patron can contribute towards such a goal. To reduce publicity, as M02 suggested, by ensuring that images that could cause difficulties (in that case showing Muslim students in a church) do not appear on social media may be a pragmatic step, but does not help to move dialogue in a direction where it becomes more natural in the wider society.

A step further than being present and observing spiritual practices would be what Sallie King lists in her typology as spiritual dialogue, "in which one learns and engages in the spiritual practices of another religion."[298] Although not inquired directly about, based on the overall attitude of the students, it is justified to conclude that this would take dialogue a step too far for almost all of them.

Thesis 5: There is interest in deep conversations about religion and faith, but opportunities are rare

A vast majority of the students were interested in learning more about the other religion and signalled openness to meet with those of the other religion for conversations that include issues of faith and religion. They were aware that talking about religion goes beyond dialogue of life and that, while listening to the other person

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[296] The experience of the author shows a much less problematic picture: Visiting mosques, engaging in conversations about faith and religion during tours through mosques or even being present during Friday prayer was enriching and did not cause problems. When explaining that the motive was to learn more about Islam, there was usually great openness on the side of the Muslims who were in charge. See also section 6.1, third point, for suggestions on visiting places of worship as part of one's studies, with the aim of learning more about the other religion.

[297] To "establish a safe space" is the first principle mentioned in the KAICIID's *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue*, 38. Without safe space dialogue can hardly succeed. See also Thesis 7.

[298] Sallie B. King, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad V. Meister (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

is paramount, differences in belief and opinion will be discovered.[299] It would be wrong, in their opinion, to exclude issues of faith and religion generally from relationships and conversations between Muslims and Christians. While it can sometimes be wise to forego the opportunity to learn more about someone else's faith and religion for the sake of not inciting debates that destroy more than they build, religion is a too important part of life for many people that it should be permanently and generally excluded from relationships and conversations.

Even in the interviews for this research, some conversations – or dialogue – developed, especially with Muslim students. The interviews already focused on topics important to them and they saw it as an opportunity to extend their knowledge, ask their questions, and have a friendly conversation with someone of the other faith. At no point did the conversations grow tense. This confirmed that when both sides meet each other with respect, knowledgeable adherents of religion can indeed have dialogue that all benefit from.[300] The statements made by the students, plus the experience during the interviews confirms what Khadijah et al.[301] describe in the reflection of the occasion when Muslim and Christian students were brought together to get to know each other and share how they live their faith and what they believe in. Not only did students learn more about the other religion during the activities, the students also "appreciated each other"[302] and "their encounter of experiencing the 'religious other' actually strengthened their own faith."[303]

In the interviews and in the conversations that developed out of the interviews, students spoke about their experiences as persons of faith or what their religion means to them. While these more personal aspects can sometimes be good starting points for a

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[299] The KAICIID's *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue*, 38-39, states that "listening actively" and "speaking with sincerity and respect" are essential in interreligious dialogue, but so is the willingness to speak about the issues the different religions have different perspectives on (see point 7 and 8 of the guide). The interviews indicated that the majority of students shared this attitude.

[300] In her second principle, King, "Interreligious Dialogue", 106, stresses the need for participants of interreligious dialogue to be knowledgable and to be able to articulate their positions.

[301] Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali et al., "Inter-Religious Dialogue Activity: An Experience among Undergraduate Students in Selected Universities in Malaysia", 79.

[302] Ibid, 79.

[303] Ibid., 80.

conversation, students also made it clear that they did not want to exclude the tenets of a religion, the official teachings and the systems that are part of a religion from the conversations. It was important for them to lay out their own beliefs[304] and ask sometimes critical questions to understand the other religion better. They also wanted to air the difficulties they had to understand certain aspects of the other religion.[305] For people like those involved in the interviews, it would be beneficial to have safe environments where no question is off limits and people would agree not to be offended as long as the conversation partner acts with respect and a willingness to understand.

M02 and C09 both mentioned that dialogue often only scratches on the surface and is rather superficial. This is a very broad and generalizing statement and there are exceptions to it (take for example M04 who regularly meets with a Christian to talk about issues of religion and faith). However, based on the openness of many of the students participating in this research, there is a chance for more conversation to happen between Muslims and Christians. Again, a lack of interest is not the issue, rather a lack of opportunities.

As mentioned in the literature about dialogue, talking about religion requires knowledge at least about one's own religion, and even better, some knowledge about the religion of one's conversation partner.[306] The more people know about their religion and the more mature they are, the better they are equipped and the deeper they can enter in conversations about religion with those of the other faith.[307] In today's world, there are ample opportunities to enhance one's knowledge about other religions, for example through heutagogy (self-determined learning), peeragogy (peer-oriented learning) and

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[304] This is in line with King's principle that "each party to the dialogue must speak for himself or herself … No one can tell another what the other believes and thinks, how another sees things." "Interreligious Dialogue", 107.

[305] The KAICIID's *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue*, 38, encourages this approach. Participants in dialogue should feel free to "speak openly and from the heart," and to "confront perceptions with honesty." It is important to keep learning as "the main purpose of the dialogue" in mind at all times.

[306] See also the notes to Thesis 1.

[307] See, for example, Khairulnizam Mat Karim, Suzy Aziziyana Saili, and Hambali, "Role of Religious Leader in Interfaith Dialogue Towards Conflict Resolution: An Islamic Perspective", *International Journal of Education and Research* 2, no. 6 (2014), 86. See also: Sohirin Mohammad Solihin et al., "Interfaith Dialogue between Ethics and Necessity – a Study from the Qur'anic Guidelines," *Asian Social Science* 9, no. 3 (2013), 101.

cybergogy (virtual-based learning).[308] Especially through the internet it is possible to receive a lot of information about one's own and other religions or to connect with people to exchange ideas, ask questions and discuss topics related to religion. To gain the most objective understanding of religions, it is advisable to consult the websites of established religious institutions rather than seeking information from fringe religious groups.

A special feature in this research was that the people included are scholars (or emerging scholars). They are knowledgeable in their faith and can therefore take steps beyond those that ordinary members of their faith-community can take. They are therefore in a good position to move Muslim-Christian dialogue forward, even beyond the much needed dialogue of life. They have expressed that they are interested in learning more and in having conversations about faith and religion. Being students of a religion should provide them with reason enough to find out more if they wish.

Thesis 6: Openness to dialogue is greater than either side expects from the other

It has already been stated that students on both sides agreed that deeper relationships and more dialogue had the potential for something good to grow out of it, both for them personally and for society. While many students made qualifications, the general tendency was clear that dialogue was something positive and that it was needed. Not only did students see the need and benefits of dialogue, they also showed personal openness for various activities and would encourage others to engage in relationships with those of other faith. The fact of living in a country often described with forms of "multi" (multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious) and the wish for people, especially people of faith, to live with each other well and in harmony and to contribute to the good of society takes an elevated position in this regard. The openness the students displayed and the positive outcome of dialogue initiatives they anticipated can also be confirmed from experiences of other students who had actually engaged in meeting

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[308] Thanks go to the external examiner of this dissertation, Dr. Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi bin Wan Razali of USIM, for this valuable advice.

students of other faith. Khadijah et al., report of "good results" when bringing students together and that "students appreciated each other."[309]

A variety of different questions in the survey and the interviews confirms this openness from various angles. Overwhelming majorities on both sides indicated a huge interest in various forms of dialogue (questions 22-26, survey). They were open to discussion about religion and faith if a scholar of the other religion approached them (question 27, survey; question 13, interview guide); they would, in general, not expect having to face criticism from their own faith community if they had contact with someone from the other faith (question 10, interview guide)[310] and would support, or at least not hinder, those asking them for advise if they could have relationships and talk about issues of faith with those who follow the other religion (question 15, interview guide). They also agreed that those of the other religion should have events where they can inform others about their own religion (questions 11-12, survey).

The openness expressed by the students stands in contrast to how they rate to what extent members of their own community, but even more, those of the other religious community wish and work for closer relationships and more dialogue (questions 14-21, survey). No other study on dialogue in Malaysia has investigated openness from this angle. The Christian students in particular indicated clearly that they did not see Muslims – neither ordinary believers nor leaders – as being interested in closer relationships and more dialogue. The questions in the survey asked for students' perception, which could be shaped by various factors, of which their own experience is only one. Others could be a general feeling, hearsay, conclusion drawn from the news or the influence of religious or political leaders, to name a few.

There are two possible explanations why students demonstrated a much higher openness than those of the other religion perceived: Either the openness and wish for dialogue and closer relationship with those of the other faith is much more prevalent

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309 Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali et al., "Inter-Religious Dialogue Activity: An Experience among Undergraduate Students in Selected Universities in Malaysia", 79.

310 This can change, especially for Muslim students, when they start to talk about religion with Christians or visit their places of worship.

among the segment included in this research than it is in general so that the perception of the students rather adequately reflects the real situation among the general believers and leaders of the other faith. In less general terms: It could be that when the Christian students thought about Muslims and their leaders and evaluated their wish and action for closer relationships and more dialogue, they were pretty accurate in their overall evaluation of Muslims and the students interviewed are just not representative for the Muslim community at large or for Muslim leaders in particular. Maybe the Muslim students included in the research are in fact much more open than other Muslims in Malaysia. Both Christians and Muslim students spoke of themselves as very open and interested in dialogue, but rated their own community and leaders only moderately high (questions 14-17, survey). So it is possible, that those involved in the research are a segment of the members of their religion that is more open than the average believer or the average leader.

The other explanations, however, is at least as likely: One group thinks about the other that it is not really open and interested in closer relationship and more dialogue as it indeed is. This sentiment is reflected in the words of C11, who, when asked whether he would approach a Muslim scholar to talk about issues of religion and faith, responded: "I don't think they are very open to that." The analysis of the interviews suggests that this perception does not adequately reflect the openness of the other side and there would be more room to engage than the hesitance on both sides to take the initiative suggests.

What can be said with confidence is that students from both sides are very open to engage in various forms of dialogue and that this openness is bigger than either side expects from the other. Not knowing how the other person might respond to an invitation can cause hesitancy to take a first step. However, as the analysis has showed, the likelihood to find open doors is very high. This then should encourage those interested in dialogue in taking the initiative and approach someone they wish to engage

in dialogue.[311] On the other side, taking the first step is more difficult than to respond to an initiative by someone else. How this obstacle can be reduced will be dealt with in the next thesis.

Thesis 7: Organized dialogue takes the sometimes difficult task of initiating dialogue away from an individual

Although some of the students, especially Muslims, said they would take the initiative and ask a Christian scholar to meet and talk about religious issues, this rarely happens. As Baharuddin, who organized events for young people of different ethnic and religious background states: "It takes courage to initiate a dialogue actually, and this was the role of the workshop organisers."[312] Their effort was to provide the opportunity for people to meet and through various activities and guided conversations open up to each other. It does not seem natural to approach someone out of the blue and start a conversation about faith and religion. Many Christian students said it would be easier if a relationship developed first. Many of the contacts and opportunities for students to get out of their bubble also came as parts of organized events. Therefore the two most promising avenues for Muslim students and Christian students to come and talk together about their faith and religion seems to be to engage in trust-building relationships first that can develop deeper, or, to bring them together in events where it is clear that faith and religion will be part of the conversation. Likely, the second avenue will work better as there is a likelihood that even in good relationships, faith and religion will be excluded from the conversation. Being a student of Islam and Christianity respectively, should make it easier to talk about religion, not only because the students have good knowledge, but it gives them a reason, or, if necessary, a justification to learn more about the other religion and engage in dialogue; something various students mentioned as helpful.

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[311] The KAICIID's *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue*, 38, encourages taking risks when it posits: "Taking risks can enhance the possibility for deeper learning and understanding of the self and others." It is important to distinguish between these risks and foolish behavior. Being willing to get out of one's comfort zone and take the first steps in initiating dialogue is a positive and constructive approach. As illustrated here, the risk is limited, as the likelihood of finding a positive response is high.

[312] "Dialogue Should Start Early," 25. See also the reference to creating safe space in Thesis 4.

This research made it very clear that students see the need to work together and to understand each other better and are therefore willing to get in touch with those of the other religion. For many to actually do so, will require fitting opportunities. Section 6.1 will lay out measures that can help to move dialogue forward. Without stepping ahead too quickly, it can be noted at this point that it would help both sides to have platforms where they can meet, engage, talk; a platform that takes away the obstacle to make the first move, to initiate a conversation. For academicians, seminars or conferences also are a "safe place" where conversations about faith and religion can take place and develop in a safe environment. Many students already have participated in such organized gatherings. The results from the survey and the interviews show that there is very little inhibition for students to meet in a safe space.

In addition, for some of the Muslims and Christians students, their studies have helped to get in touch with some people of the other faith group and some have even built strong relationships with individuals that can potentially lead to more dialogue in the future. Some Muslim students have reported that they approached Christians as part of an assignment for the studies. C07 also mentioned that she would not approach a Muslim scholar without specific cause. However, if she had an assignment to write and needed information, this would give her a cause to do so.

Thesis 8: Dialogue partners who acknowledge their faith commitments openly reduce the potential for suspicions

So far, it has been shown that students on both sides were interested in having day-to-day contacts with members of the other faith and expanding their knowledge of the other religion through conversations. As answers in the interviews made clear, excluding religious topics may help to avoid misunderstandings but is also not completely satisfying. Religion is too much part of what life is about and takes an important identity-shaping role to simply exclude it from relationships and conversations. But even stopping here, with what could be characterized as academic, professional, fact-based conversation about faith and religion, would be less than a

holistic approach to the issue. One could distinguish between conversations centring on religion (emphasizing the more formal, creedal aspects) and those centring on faith (emphasizing the more personal aspects). The idea behind it is that dialogue that focuses on one's personal faith is less prone to inciting conflict because the participants share how they experience their religion or what it means to them compared to discussing creeds, tenets or doctrine.

While this approach will be helpful to start with, a number of students made it clear that they want to talk about facts and the teachings of the religions and well-equipped students should be in a position to talk with each other about what their religion teaches. However, people who subscribe to the tenets of their religion and experience their religion in certain ways, usually are convinced and committed to what they believe. To speak about religion and faith detached from what they as persons hold dear and consider the truth, is far from satisfying.[313] This could be seen, for example, in the Muslim students' emphasis that even their fundamental belief of a shared humanity that unites people on a very basic level does not spring from a humanistic worldview. The students' concern for people meeting as human beings is anchored in their Islamic belief. This shows how integrated belief is with attitudes, perspectives and eventually practices. If the Muslim and Christian students meet, they meet as people of faith.

In conjunction with this, there is no sense in ignoring that both Islam and Christianity are missionary religions.[314] This is an aspect often ignored by writers such as Sally King who writes: "It is forbidden to enter dialogue with the intention or desire of converting one's dialogue partner."[315] There are, of course, aspects of truth in this statement. But the issue has to be treated in a more differentiated way. The majority of Muslim students affirmed that dialogue is a means to spread one's faith. For them, to have relationships with Christians or to be engaged in a dialogue with them cannot be

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[313] King, "Interreligious Dialogue," 106, agrees that dialogue "requires witness, understood as expressing one's own perspective, experience, and commitment to one's religion." The last aspect, "commitment," is central here.

[314] See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islamic-Christian Dialogue: Problems and Obstacles to Be Pondered and Overcome," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11, no. 2 (2000), 222.

[315] Sallie B. King, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad V. Meister (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106.

totally separated from their wish for these Christians to become Muslims. For many it goes much further than only being a wish. Many Christians thought likewise but said they were hindered by the legal stipulations in Malaysia.

Both Muslim and Christian students stressed that sharing one's faith with someone else must never be understood as putting pressure on the other person. Muslims stated that their responsibility ends with presenting Islam as the right path. Christians stressed that one can never convert someone else but that this was God's business. The fear of "being converted" is only appropriate if conversion is seen as something done to one by someone else. However, as Wolfgang Lienemann[316] points out: People who convert take an active role in the process of conversion. It is not something done to them by someone else. Of course, there need to be some guidelines in order not to exploit vulnerable people and difficult situations they find themselves in for the sake of winning converts. For the Christian community, such guidelines are presented in the document "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct"[317] that was issued on highest levels by representatives of various Christian traditions.

When people meet for dialogue and these occasions end up being dominated by the idea of propagating one's faith (something that was experienced by students on both sides), something has gone wrong. However, it seems that it would make conversations more relaxed if people accepted it as normal and stopped being offended if others express the commitment to their faith and the wish for them to believe and experience the same. This is not to equate mission/*da'wah* with dialogue. But dialogue presupposes

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[316] See Wolfgang Lienemann, "Einführung," in *Religiöse Grenzüberschreitungen: Studien Zu Bekehrung, Konfessions- und Religionswechsel = Crossing Religious Borders: Studies on Conversion and Religious Belonging*, ed. Christine Lienemann-Perrin and Wolfgang Lienemann, Studies in the History of Christianity in the Non-Western World (Asia, Africa, Latin America) (Wiesbaden, GER: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 7.

[317] World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and World Evangelical Alliance, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct," World Council of Churches (28. June 2011), https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world. It is rare that there are joint publications issued by these three huge streams of Christianity, which adds to the importance of this declaration. The author is not aware of a similar statement from the Muslim community. This is not to say that there are no individual publications that deal with the ethics of dialogue from a Muslim perspective.

commitment. And while some constraint is necessary for dialogue to succeed, it should not surprise if this commitment can also be sensed in conversations as a wish for the conversation partner to come to the same conviction. This is probably best expressed by the term "witness," which Muslim and Christian authors[318] see as part of the dialogue process. If people could grant each other the right to wish that others joined their religion instead of being surprised by it, it would represent the real character of missionary religions much more adequately. If this could happen anywhere, it is among learned, mature representatives of the respective religions, like these students. Because of their knowledge, they can be expected to respond adequately. When they were asked how they would respond if they felt that the other person had a wish for them to join their religion, reactions were mixed. Some said that they would be disappointed or annoyed by it. Many others, however, said they would see it as a normal expression of someone who is committed to his or her faith and that they would be able to handle such situations and continue with the relationship.[319]

While this represents adequately the notions from the interviews, it needs to be recognized that in Malaysia, religions do not meet on a plane field. Islam is the dominant religion with special status anchored in the constitution. While the provisions safeguard Islam as the religion of the federation, these provisions also directly impact the prospects of dialogue as the following theses will show.

Thesis 9: Christians who do not respect limits set to other religions than Islam, endanger dialogue

A number of Muslim students in this study mentioned how annoyed they are, when Christians do not respect that Islam is the only right religion and has been given a special role in Malaysia. While they were interested in knowing more about

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[318] Nasr, "Islamic-Christian Dialogue: Problems and Obstacles to Be Pondered and Overcome", 222; Pratt, *Being Open, Being Faithful*, 16.

[319] When conversations with Muslim students developed after the interview, they often went like this: S.H.: "Would you wish for me to become a Muslim?" Muslim student: "I sure do!" S.H.: "Do you think, I would also wish for you to become a Christian?" Muslim student: "I think so, yes." Then there was agreement that there still could be a friendly, meaningful conversation where one tried to understand the other person and his or her faith better. At no point were the conversations awkward or tense. Having addressed the topic openly left no room for suspicion.

Christianity, they had no interest in being preached to. As M04 mentioned, she was disappointed when Christians used dialogue sessions in a way she interpreted as Christians attempting to evangelize them. Or, M11 who pointed out that it was an impediment to dialogue and good relations if Christians did not accept that Islam has been given special rights and try to push the boundaries further. There were Muslim students who said they would understand that Christians wanted to share their faith with them and who saw it as a sign that they are serious with their faith. However, the mainstream opinion among the Muslim students was that it was the privilege of Muslims to share their faith with others and that others did not have the same right when talking with Muslims. This is, of course, in line with the constitution and various other legal stipulations[320] and while even some Muslims said this could be considered unfair in the eyes of Christians (M10), they upheld that this was necessary and was the way Malaysia's system worked.[321]

For many of the Muslim students, dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Malaysia does not take place at eye-level. It is not a communication between people whose positions are of equal rights. While this is a generalization, it is the overall position. Christians in other contexts have made this plain. For example, Paul Hinder, who is the Catholic Bishop for the Arab world, writes: "It is also true that in our conversations with Muslims … we are not talking at eye-level. Dialogue that is free of dominion in the sense of Habermas[322] does not take place here. This must and can be so clearly and assertively expressed here."[323] Christians can bemoan this situation, but if they do not accept it, it hinders dialogue.

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[320] See Section 1.1 of this dissertation, where the constitutional framework for Islam and other religions' space was laid out.

[321] The KAICIID's *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue*, 38, makes a compelling case for establishing clear ground rules as a fundamental principle of effective interreligious dialogue. However, in Malaysia these cannot be freely negotiated among the participants; they are part of a larger framework set by the structure of society and rules established by the federal and state laws of Malaysia.

[322] A German philosopher; the philosophical concept he propagated is called "herrschaftsfreier Dialog" which translates to dialogue without dominion. The translation of this quote is the author's.

[323] Paul Hinder and Simon Biallowons, *Als Bischof in Arabien: Erfahrungen Mit dem Islam* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2016), 106-107.

There are many opportunities for Christians and Muslims to come together, to work, feast, and talk, where this imbalance may bear no or little weight. However, as the previous section showed, the students in the research are not divided beings. Being Muslim or Christian is part of who they are; it is an important aspect of their life that cannot just be excluded if their dialogue should go deeper and involve the whole person. Sharing one's faith with others and inviting them to join one's religion is a vital aspect of both religions (in Islam in the context of *da'wah*, for Christians as an aspect of evangelizing). However, the imbalance described above will restrict the way dialogue can take place. If Christians do not respect these limits, they endanger dialogue to succeed. If they respect the limits, they need to bridle themselves and thus restrain from how they would express their faith naturally.

Thesis 10: Muslims need to be aware of their own faith community's perspective when engaging in dialogue

Another issue that makes dialogue difficult – albeit all interest showed by the students – is that Muslims can be accused by other Muslims that they went beyond limits. The best example is M02 who got into trouble with the authorities for having conducted an interreligious student camp. He also spoke about the restrictions he and other student leaders place on those who join to visit a building belonging to another religion not to take photos or even post them on social media. Sometimes, questions of suspicion raised by the family or the Muslim community start much earlier, as M03 said. Concerns can be raised from various sides: they can have social aspects (the family observing critically when a Muslim student meets with a Christian, as in the case of M04), legal aspects (Malays are Muslims per the Constitution), and religious aspects (Islam prohibits apostasy). Sometimes the different aspects conflate and especially the concern that someone could leave Islam often looms in the background if it is not made explicit. As these illustrations show, the Muslim community, peers and family as well as leaders and representatives of religious institutions might have an eye on persons who raise suspicions within the Muslim community based on their interactions with

Christians. This means that there are limits to what Muslims can do if they want to be considered faithful to their religion and avoid unwelcome questions from other Muslims as well as trouble with authorities.

Perspectives on how religious freedom for Muslims should be defined vary. There are groups like the "Civil group G25" that consists of former high ranking civil servants who argue on a legal basis, that, while apostasy is a major sin in Islam, the Constitution's overarching intention is to grant religious freedom to Muslims who want to change their religion, too.[324] Others argue on a humanist basis that all people, Muslims included, should be free to choose to follow any or no religion.[325]

But apart from human rights advocates there are also Muslim scholars like Husin and Ibrahim who argue on the basis of Sura 2:256 and 109:6 that people should have freedom to decide for themselves which religion they want to follow. They see compulsion as running counter to the very reason for the creation of humans. Humans were born with the capacity to choose right from wrong: "Compulsion is indeed a denigration of his talents and a violation of man's dignity. As a matter of fact, it is through the freedom of will and action that man can be tested and therefore held responsible for his undertakings. Indeed it is due to his freedom (to choose and to act) that man's submission to God is highly regarded."[326] While denying that all religions are equally true, they see the regulations in the constitution as an unnecessary restraint for Muslims to change their religion: "[T]he Qur'an puts it that truth is clearer than error and it suggests that Muslims should also possesses [sic!] the freedom to choose between the two. There shouldn't be imposition of his decision making."[327]

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[324] Jerry Choong, "G25: Apostasy a Major Sin, but Constitution Provides Freedom of Worship for Muslims Too," Malay Mail (16. January 2020), https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/01/16/g25-apostasy-a-major-sin-but-constitution-provides-freedom-of-worship-for-m/1828698.

[325] Preeti Jha, "Losing Faith: Leaving Islam in Malaysia Poses Social and Legal Challenges – but a New Generation Is Demanding Change," New Humanist (31. March 2020), https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5596/losing-faith.

[326] Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin and Haslina Ibrahim, "Religious Freedom, the Malaysian Constitution and Islam: A Critical Analysis," *SBSPRO Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 217 (2016), 1219.

[327] Ibid., 1220.

Again, others see the limits of freedom for Muslims to choose their religion and for others to propagate their religion to them as a necessary safeguard from exposure to any teaching not in line with the truth. Zuliza Mohd Kusrin et al. write that the provisions made in the constitution and in other laws are "appropriate for preserving the sanctity of Islam."[328] Zakir Naik, in a gathering posted online,[329] answered the question why propagation to Muslims was prohibited in some countries with reference to Surah 3:19. The affirmation that Islam is the only true religion, in his evaluation, justifies that Muslims should not be exposed to other teaching.

Being exposed to or taking interest in other teaching is often seen as a potential first step towards turning away from Islam by others in the Muslim community. A good number of the students therefore mentioned that even if they only wanted to gain more knowledge and better understanding of Christians and their teaching, this bore the potential that others could raise questions about their loyalty to Islam.

Thesis 11: The legal situation causes great reluctance for Christian students to engage in deeper dialogue

The Christian students' greatest concern regarding dialogue with Muslims was that they risk being accused to propagate the Christian faith to Muslims, no matter whether this was factually the case or not. Many Christian students are extremely careful in their contact with Muslims because of the potential it could be used against them and interpreted as propagation. This is an additional major issue that contributes to the prospects of dialogue not being as gloomy as the personal interest and openness of the students on both sides suggests.

Muslim scholars point out and justify the need to restrict the propagation to Muslims as mentioned above. In addition to protecting the sanctity of Islam, Zuliza Mohd Kusrin et al. state as reasons "the background and history of the special status and

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328 Zuliza Mohd Kusrin et al., "Legal Provisions and Restrictions on the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religions among Muslims in Malaysia", 2.

329 Zakir Naik, "Why Do Certain Muslim Countries Do Not Allow Propagation of Other Religions?," Youtube (04. November 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zn4_VR2JO6U.

position of Islam in Malaya"[330] and to the role of the Malay Rulers as the guardians of Islam in Malaysia; a role they held form pre-independence times until now.[331] Their concern is that the laws are not implemented adequately, especially against non-Muslims.[332]

When Christian students are reluctant in their contact with Muslims, it is not just their feeling that makes them careful. Legal stipulations are so far-reaching that one easily risks being accused to act unlawfully, should someone have the intention to do so. Article 11 (1) of the Constitution grants every person "the right to profess and practise his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it." Clause 4 reads: "State law and in respect of the Federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam." Based on this clause, various states have passed legislation to control and restrict the propagation of non-Islamic religions. Most of these enactments are similar. The first such Enactment was passed in Negeri Terengganu and serves as example here. Section 4 (1) states: "A person commits an offence if he persuades, influences, or incites another person who is a Muslim (a) to become a follower or member of, or to be inclined toward, a non-Islamic religion; or (b) to forsake or disfavour the religion of Islam."[333] Based on this legislation, people already commit an offense if they "influence" a Muslim "to be inclined toward a non-Islamic religion."

This is not a dissertation on the law of Malaysia and its detailed interpretation, but this example shows that the bar is very low for Christians (in this case) to violate the law. It is safe to say that the concern about the legal situation shapes the Christian students' attitude and behavior in regard to dialogue more than anything else. The

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[330] Zuliza Mohd Kusrin et al., "Legal Provisions and Restrictions on the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religions among Muslims in Malaysia", 1.

[331] Ibid., 3-7.

[332] Ibid., 15-16.

[333] Negeri Terengganu, "Control and Restriction of the Propagation of Non-Islamic Eeligions Enactment 1980," http://www2.esyariah.gov.my/esyariah/mal/portalv1/enakmen2011/Eng_enactment_Upd.nsf/f831ccddd195843f48256fc600141e84/036793ad4555947d48257e2f000bbf4a?OpenDocument.

concept that unites these concerns is the *potentiality* that such relationships and conversations could be interpreted in a way that brings the Christians involved in a difficult situation. This concern goes beyond the Muslim person involved directly; it could also be, so the Christian students, that others in the Muslim community potentially blame Christians of attempts to convert Muslims. It is less the fact of what is happening and the intention or motives the conversations partners have that is in focus here, but how the relationship and the conversations could be interpreted or even twisted by others and this is of concern. Could speaking about the depth of a religious experience influence someone to feel attracted to the Christian faith? Could a mutual reading of the Holy Scriptures potentially awake an interest in a Muslim about Christianity? How about a Christian speaking joyfully about the assurance of eternal salvation? Even if it was not meant by the Christian as a means of propagation, could it be understood as such? Or: How could one prove that it was not meant as such? The ice is thin and these uncertainties will remain, unless there are changes to the relevant legislation. One potential solution would be not to criminalise propagation to Muslims itself, but unethical propagation. This could include instances where individuals or organisations exploit emergency situations or provide financial incentives to encourage conversion. However, this would most likely be a change too far reaching in the eyes of many Muslims in Malaysia. Another, more limited, change towards the limitation of uncertainties would be to define transgression based on objective actions of propagation instead of the subjective perceptions of their impact on Muslims as it is the case right now. This would demarcate the line for what is allowed and what not more clearly and by that take away much of the existing ambiguity.

There are good reasons that Christians want to make sure they are not being accused of propagation, as the interviews made clear. Some referred to concerns for their own safety or those of their congregations and some said they wanted to be good citizens, adhere to the law and keep harmony. They also know that they are a minority and that in such a position it is better not to risk the freedom that exists.

Conclusion

Whereas at the beginning of the chapter the prospects for growing dialogue seemed quite promising, now, at the end of the chapter, when seeing the entire picture, the prospects seem to be rather mixed. When the overlapping interests of students on both sides are taken together with their attitudes and the conditions of society, what insights can be gained from the study regarding the prospects of dialogue? How can dialogue succeed? How can the challenges posed by certain aspects of the socio-cultural setting be mitigated in a way that facilitates productive dialogue? The following chapter will present suggestions for the implementation of dialogue based on the parameters learned from the research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This final chapter is designed to provide a forward-looking perspective. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section will examine the implications of the study for the prospects of dialogue. At the same time, it will suggest a number of avenues that may enhance the likelihood of dialogue being successful. The second section will identify a few areas where further research could be beneficial.

6.1 Dialogue – Suggestions toward Implementation

This research has shown that for Muslim as well as Christian students in the study the tendency was clear: they wish to have closer contact with those of the other religion. Their preferential option was not to stay apart, but to find ways to come together. For those who are interested in promoting dialogue, the way forward will require to create and enlarge space for people to come together in a variety of ways, for different activities that all have the fostering of relationships, the enlarging of knowledge and the good of society as their goal. How can such initiatives look like and what could be helpful? The following considerations spring from reflection of the research and are meant to provide stepping stones for practical implementation.

First, there are cultural values that can be built on, like longing for harmony, solidarity, good relationships and being a good neighbour. They are all engrained in Malaysian society and are strengths that can be utilized to enhance dialogue. Several students mentioned that it used to be normal that neighbours invited each other, helped each other out and undertook activities together. There was also the notion that a lot has been lost in this regard. But that does not mean that it is lost forever. Rather, this spirit of harmony and belonging together (as humans, as Malaysians, etc.) can be rekindled when people dare to take a step towards each other. There is enough common ground for Muslims and Christians living together even if it sometimes seems to require that this common ground needs to be rediscovered to be built upon.

A good example is the initiative the Global Unity Network took after the bombings of churches and hotels in Sri Lanka in the spring of 2019. They visited a church in Kuala Lumpur to express their solidarity with the Christians who were killed in the terrorist attack. They were present during a mass and had a meeting with the parish priest. A spokesman said, referring back to the attack on a mosque that took place in New Zealand just weeks earlier: "In Christchurch, when people of Islamic faith were killed, non-Muslims showed us their solidarity. Following the attacks in Colombo, where Christians were murdered, we Muslims also need to show our closeness. We must not manifest compassion and solidarity only when Muslims die. We must express concern if even a non-Muslim is killed. We need to be fair to everyone.".[334] Standing together in times of need and tragedy not only brings those together who participate, but also is a sign for the wider community.

Second, for those interested in dialogue initiatives, it will be important to keep in mind that there is greater openness for dialogue among those belonging to the other religion than commonly assumed. The research has shown this clearly and it has been referred to already. The chance to find someone interested in dialogue, at least among the students interviewed, is so high that it should allow people to approach each other with more confidence and thus overcome the natural shyness, hesitation or reluctance. It is easier to take the initiative to dialogue if it is likely that the other person will be open for it. Exemplary is the statement made by M15 who said that she wished so much to have a Christian friend but simply did not have opportunities to meet Christians. The figures in questions 22-27 in the survey speak for themselves: Whatever the suggested kind of dialogue initiative: the chance to meet someone who is open for it is very high.

Third, it will be helpful to create opportunities where students can come together that leave little room for misinterpretation. As the interviews have showed, for a Christian student to approach a Muslim student asking whether he or she was interested in reading the Bible and the Qur'an together was a high hurdle – and understandably so.

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[334] AsiaNews.it, "Muslim Activists Express Solidarity with Christians Killed in Sri Lanka," AsiaNews.it (29. April 2019), http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Muslim-activists-express-solidarity-with-Christians-killed-in-Sri-Lanka-46875.html.

This is only one example where the concern that the attempt for better understanding and deeper relationship could be interpreted as an attempt to proselytize weighs high. Other ways are much less prone to be misinterpreted in such a way. The dinners that are jointly organized by the Global Unity Network and Christians for Peace & Harmony in Malaysia and take place during Ramadan and the Christmas season are a good example. The author also met students there who were part of the study. The dinners are opportunities for Muslim and Christian leaders to gather, build relationships and talk with each other. They are also group gatherings which make them less susceptible to critique for individuals who participate. Creating opportunities and safe space "where participants are able to share without fear of judgement or discrimination"[335] is one of the most promising endeavours for those who want to encourage dialogue.

Another example for activities that are less likely to be misinterpreted are those that take place as part of study purposes. For many of the students, their studies provided a rare opportunity to get in touch with those of the other religion or to have conversations about the two faiths. The interreligious activities organized by different Islamic Study departments for their students also lay a pattern that can be followed. The author's own positive experience of visiting mosques and even being present during Friday prayer also demonstrates that when people wish to learn more about another religion, especially as part of their studies, they are likely to be welcomed to do so. Many mosques are open at most times of the day, whereas many churches are not. For those wishing to attend Friday prayer or a Sunday worship service, it is advisable to either go with an acquaintance who is a member of the other religion or to arrive early and speak to a leader about one's intention to be present. While not strictly necessary, it is a gesture of courtesy that helps to build trust. Furthermore, it allows one to establish contact with a suitable conversation partner.

Forth, it is always a good idea to have a patron of high social and/or religious standing for activities that involve different religions. This was the experience of M02 who planned to include a university professor when conducting a camp with students of

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[335] KAICIID Dialogue Centre, "What Is Dialogue?" https://www.kaiciid.org/dialogue.

different religions the next time. This takes some burden from the individuals who organize the activities. This is also seen beyond the circle of students who were interviewed. From 2012-2017 the Sultanah Raja Zarith, wife of the Sultan of Johor, had taken over patronage for a dialogue program with students called "Diversity & Inclusion Youth Camp", which was initiated and led by two women, Patricia Nunis, a Christian, and her colleague, Dr Hamidah Marican, a Muslim.[336] Having the backup by a person of high standing granted them the freedom they needed for their programs. While at this time, students might wish to find a patron for some initiatives, it should be noted that, depending on how the career of these students develops, in the future at least some of them might be in a position where they can take over the role of a patron for dialogue programmes.

Fifth, and this might seem surprising, there are what could be called "impossible possibilities", situations that are unlikely to occur but sometimes develop. While C13, pastor of a certain denomination, refused to talk with a Muslim in depth about the Christian faith, C11, another pastor of the same denomination, was more open and met with a group of Muslim men over a couple of months and M04 said that she meets regularly with a Christian woman to read the Bible. Based on the concerns raised on both sides that have been laid out in the previous chapter one could think that such gatherings would not happen. But they do. They take place when curiosity, interest and purpose are stronger than hesitations on both sides. It depends on the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to a certain degree and will develop further once trust between the conversation partners has been built.

Another two points should be added, thinking of the students as future leaders. If the students want to support dialogue between Muslims and Christians in the future, they can help their religious communities through their own example and by creating space for dialogue. But they should also invest in training believers in their own religion and, at least in part, in helping them understand the other religion so that there will be a basic understanding of people of different religion when they meet. Being

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[336] Personal communication with Ms. Patricia Nunis on 19th of March, 2021 by e-mail.

knowledgeable about one's own faith and having basic knowledge about other religions has been mentioned as the single most criterion for people to be able to be engaged in interreligious dialogue. The value of religious education programs for dialogue must not be underestimated.

Lastly, in light of the great openness of students on both sides for events organized by Muslim and Christian congregations to introduce themselves to the public (questions 11 and 12 in the survey), it would be worthwhile to consider for religious communities in Malaysia to have an Open Day where mosques, churches, and other places of worship are open to the public for visits and engagements with the believers there. It would be one way how space can be created for people to come together. As future leaders the students will find ways to pursue this thought further in their organizations and institutions, should they wish to do so.

This dissertation has been written during a global pandemic and before moving on to highlighting areas in which further research could be meaningful, maybe an analogy of the times of this pandemic and the possibilities for dialogue is in order. In between periods of strict lockdown, there were times when people were allowed to meet. Many hesitated. They did not want to bring themselves into danger and they also had the health of the other person as well as the well-being of society as a whole in mind. When people thought about meeting with someone else, there was often a subtle and cautious evaluation going on how responsible the other person lived and with how many other people he or she had met in the recent past to figure out if the benefit of meeting would outweigh the risk.

When the students were asked if it was better for followers of the two religions to stay apart, the overwhelming majority declined. They were looking for opportunities to come together – just like many people did after a long period of movement restrictions during the pandemic. That life was better in community than in separation was the attitude reflected in the interviews.

If people want to get together and engage in dialogue on different levels, it will always require someone to take a calculated risk – the risk of rejection by those of the

other religion or the risk of earning strange looks or the potential of being questioned about one's motives by people of the own faith community. There is also a risk of having one's own thoughts, ideas and beliefs questioned in the process of dialogue. For Christians there is also the risk to be accused of having overstepped the legal boundaries (regardless of whether they have done so or not). But those who dare to take calculated risks may also reap the benefits of dialogue: deeper and better understanding of each other and one's own faith, developing connections and even friendships, and greater cohesion in society. As mentioned above, dialogue can and will happen if people see greater benefit than risk in the endeavour.

6.2 Suggestions for further research

Three main areas for further research can be envisioned. While this research took into account experiences with people of the other religion, the main focus was on people's attitudes towards and interest in dialogue. It would be worthwhile to find out how these students act in practice. How would they actually respond to the invitation to participate in a camp or if approached by someone of the other religion about reading the Bible and the Qur'an together? Would the findings from reality match what students stated in this research? Where would the discrepancies lie and what are the reasons for it? This would be a first direction for further research.

A second research project would be to trace the students from this study and involve them in a further study in the future, maybe in 10 or 15 years from now. For one, it would show if the assumption that they are likely to be people who have some influence on others in their own faith community is correct. But, more importantly, it would allow to see if their opinion as professionals has changed compared to the time when they were students and if so, what are the factors for this change?

Another suggestion for a further study inspired by this one would be to investigate other segments of the Muslim and Christian population and ask them similar questions. As in every research the selection of participants for the study limits the transferability of findings beyond this group. While all students in this study were

bilingual, would students who speak only Malay answer differently? What about students in undergraduate programs? Apart from students, how would current active leaders of Muslim and Christian communities, congregations or organizations respond to the questions? How about those in the Muslim and Christian communities who are not (prospective) leaders and are not as educated in their faith as these students? How about differences in urban and rural settings? To conduct studies that take into focus what this study purposely left out would provide a fuller picture of the attitudes towards dialogue in the wider Muslim and Christian community in the country.

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