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Understanding the Rulings on Greetings and Prayers for Non-Muslims in Selangor: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

Issues such as conveying 'Rest in Peace (RIP)' for non-Muslims have long been discussed among the community. Recognising the diverse cultural and religious landscape in Selangor, this research aims to uncover the attitudes and experiences of Muslims and non-Muslims toward these religious practices. This study investigates how Muslim and non-Muslim residents in Selangor, Malaysia, perceive and respond to greetings and prayers in Muslim-majority communities. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines qualitative and quantitative surveys to gather data from a representative sample of Muslim and non-Muslim individuals living in Selangor. The qualitative method is used to review the literature and scholars' opinions from classical and contemporary sources. The quantitative surveys aim to quantify the prevalence and variability of these experiences within the broader Muslim and non-Muslim population. By exploring factors such as cultural background, personal beliefs, and interfaith interactions, this research seeks to foster mutual understanding and respect among different communities. It offers recommendations for policymakers, religious leaders, and community members to promote inclusivity and harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims in Selangor. The findings contribute to the existing knowledge on interfaith relations and multiculturalism, shedding light on how greetings and prayers impact non-Muslim individuals. This research encourages dialogue and aims to bridge the gap between religious and cultural communities, ultimately fostering social cohesion and interfaith harmony in Selangor in particular and Malaysia in general.

INTRODUCTION

Islam has provided a foundation of effective interaction that guides Muslims in maintaining relationships with people of different religions. This is important as its values help to ensure that good relations among people are fostered and preserved. Human relationships are formed based on two fundamental elements, namely theological (religious) and sociological (humanitarian). The theological relationship is exclusive, involving only intra-religious followers as it pertains to the same religion. In contrast, the sociological

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relationship is more inclusive, encompassing all people across religious and ethnic differences. Rasulullah PBUH is known for his manners and behaviour towards the non-believers (*Mushrikin*). It was once reported that Rasulullah PBUH stood and paid respect when the bier of a Jew passed him. Even though it is well-known how hostile the Jews were towards Islam, the Prophet still stood and showed respect to the deceased (Al-Bukhari, No. 103). In Malaysia, interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims often involve kinship and friendships. Thus, such interactions raise certain issues that need to be viewed under the Shariah rulings and perspectives to ensure the bonded ties are aligned with Islamic principles.

The issue arises when Muslims wish to congratulate non-Muslims during celebrations, festivals, and marriages. This is because Muslims are encouraged to engage and interact with non-Muslims to maintain good relationships. Additionally, Muslims encounter similar concerns when their non-Muslim neighbours or friends experience calamities, such as the loss of family members. Due to the importance of upholding *aqidah*, Muslims are limited in the expressions and actions they can offer. For example, during the death of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022, some Muslims expressed their grief by saying 'Rest in Peace' to the Queen. This sparked debate among Muslims worldwide regarding the extent to which Islam permits expressions of sympathy for deceased non-Muslims and whether it is acceptable to pray for their peace after death. Such questions will continue to arise if there is no clear understanding of appropriate greetings and prayers for non-Muslims, especially in Malaysia.

Therefore, to resolve the misunderstanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, many Muslim scholars have established clear guidelines on interacting (*muamalah*) with non-Muslims based on the Quran, as-Sunnah, the interactions between the Prophet and the *Musyrikin*, and by referring to the current context of human interaction. Thus, using the existing resources, the researchers developed a study on understanding the rulings of greetings and prayers for non-Muslims in Selangor.

This research attempts to define and differentiate religious and custom greetings and develop comprehensive guidelines on greetings and prayers towards non-Muslims. In addition, the research aims to measure the level of understanding among people living in Selangor regarding greetings and prayers for non-Muslims and to suggest practical ways to extend well-wishes to non-Muslims during festivals by implementing the knowledge of greetings and prayers in Islam.

Regarding the issue of greetings and partaking in non-Muslim festivals, the Perlis State Fatwa Committee Meeting (Jabatan Mufti Perlis, 2019) decided that attending and engaging in religious celebrations of non-Muslims is not permissible. This is due to the association of such activities with non-Islamic religious rituals or *tasyabbuh*, which is deemed prohibited. Zulkifli al-Bakri, former mufti of the Federal Territories of Malaysia, wrote that it is crucial to understand that there is no unanimous consensus among scholars prohibiting congratulating non-Muslims. Muslims can wish congratulations and participate in and celebrate the festivities as long as they are within the traditional customs and do not involve religious rituals or beliefs. It is permissible since it does not affect the *aqidah*, which can bring slander to Islam and damage Muslim belief (Alias & Anisah, 2008). This is also supported by Ibrahim (2010) and Mohammed Sabbar Taha et al. (2016), who stated that it is also permissible for Muslim leaders, neighbours, friends, and relatives to attend the celebrations to maintain relationships with non-Muslims and to avoid any slander to Islam.

Attending a non-Muslim reception or open house that does not involve religious rituals is permissible if Muslims are present and there is a valid need to do so, such as maintaining good relations with family members, neighbours, and community leaders, as well as facilitating the spread of Islamic teachings. However, this is allowed only under the condition that one does not condone or participate in any acts of disbelief. The issue of congratulating non-Muslims on their religious festivals is a matter of differing scholarly opinions. Based on the cultural reality in Malaysia, it is considered necessary to congratulate non-Muslims if the practice of congratulating has become a cultural norm rather than a strictly religious practice. This is permitted as long as the congratulatory expression does not involve or imply any form of *shirk*

(association of partners with Allah) or disbelief. This obligation is subject to requirements such as safeguarding the welfare or interests of preaching (Jabatan Mufti Perlis, 2019).

Alias and Anisah (2008) concluded that partaking in non-Muslim celebrations is prohibited when these conditions are met: (1) within the festivities, specific actions are forbidden and contradict the principles of Islamic theology and Sharia law, (2) participating in such events may tarnish the religious convictions of Muslim individuals and potentially lead them to engage in questionable behaviour, (3) attending these celebrations can inadvertently promote the misconception, particularly among the younger generation, that the festival and its associated religion are in alignment with Islamic beliefs and Sharia, (4) the festival's foundation lies in religious doctrines rather than the customs specific to a particular ethnic group. If the celebrations do not fulfil the conditions above thus, it is permissible for Muslims to participate in them. However, Muslims should be cautious since this is related to the Islamic creed. On the other hand, al-Qaradhawi (2019) has ruled that it is permissible to congratulate non-Muslims on their happy occasions as long as they are not at war or considered enemies of Muslims.

Regarding the issue of prayers to non-Muslims, Meerangani (2016) explained that Islam establishes prayer as a means to connect every individual and their Creator, Allah. It emphasises that all creatures are commanded to direct their concerns and supplications, both about worldly matters and the afterlife, solely to Allah. Allah is recognised as The Deity who governs and creates the entire universe and everything within it. In addition, regular prayers can help alleviate the burdens of residing in a neglected community and positively impact their mental well-being, as observed in a study by Krause (2011). Additionally, offering prayers for others seems to protect against the adverse physical health effects caused by financial difficulties, as indicated by Krause (2003).

Meerangani et al. (2018) stated that Muslims are permitted to engage in three types of prayer when it comes to non-Muslims who are alive. These prayers involve seeking guidance, asking for their well-being and success in worldly matters, and requesting forgiveness from God on their behalf. In the matter of praying for non-Muslims who have passed away, scholars unanimously agree that it is forbidden to offer prayers seeking forgiveness and well-being for them. According to the Mufti of the Federal Territory (2022), the phrase Rest in Peace (RIP) for non-Muslims is prohibited as it is a way to pray for forgiveness, peace, and mercy to the dead non-Muslims since it is related to Christianity, and using the religious plea is considered as recognising their religions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive research design, aimed at outlining the characteristics of the population. Data was collected from respondents in Selangor via a Google Forms survey. The collected data was then analysed to conclude the level of understanding and tolerance among Muslims and non-Muslims in Selangor regarding the celebration of various festivals. Selangor was chosen as the study area due to its significant religious diversity, ranking as the most populous state in Malaysia with a high number of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. The inclusion of all districts within Selangor allows for comprehensive data collection, capturing a wide range of perspectives from residents across the state.

The research approach employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method involves the use of numerical data or measurable information, while the qualitative approach relies on non-numerical data that cannot be directly quantified. This qualitative approach is particularly useful when handling non-standardized information that requires interpretation through words, as in managerial decision-making processes.

For the analysis, the researcher integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This combined approach was essential because certain findings required personal and interpretive assessments based on

information gathered from respondents. At the same time, other conclusions could be drawn through simple mathematical calculations, such as determining percentages and averages from the quantitative data.

The population for this study was about 200 respondents, comprising residents of Selangor aged 18 years and above. Participants must either reside in the state or be studying at colleges or universities in Selangor. They can be Muslim or non-Muslim, as the research aims to identify the relationship between the tolerance of both groups and their understanding of the rulings on greetings and prayers in Islam. The researchers used a Google Forms survey to conduct the study. The survey consisted of the following sections, classified into four parts: (1) Demographic Information, (2) Concept of Greeting and Prayer in Islam, (3) Understanding and Application in Daily Life (Non-Muslims), and (4) Understanding and Application in Daily Life (Muslims).

The collected data were reviewed, compared, and analysed to align with this study's research questions. Descriptive and deductive approaches were used to extract information from the survey results.

RESULTS

The questionnaire was distributed to the public through an online platform. A total of 153 respondents were collected from the targeted 200 respondents. Nevertheless, the data collected were sufficient to achieve the objectives of this research.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency, N	Percentage
Gender	Male	75	49%
	Female	78	51%
	Total	153	100%
Age	18 – 25	130	85%
	26 – 30	10	6.5%
	31 – 35	1	0.7%
	36 – 40	8	5.2%
	40 and above	4	2.6%
	Total	153	100%
District	Petaling	37	24.2%
	Hulu Langat	24	15.7%
	Klang	14	19.2%
	Gombak	62	40.5%
	Kuala Langat	3	2%
	Sepang	5	3.3%
	Kuala Selangor	4	2.6%
	Hulu Selangor	2	1.3%
	Sabak Bernam	2	1.3%
	Total	153	100%
Religion	Islam	113	73.9%
	Others	40	26.1%
	Christian	(5)	(13.2%)
	Hindu	(7)	(18.4%)
	Buddha	(26)	(68.4%)
	Total	153 (38)	100% (100%)

Source: Authors, 2024

DISCUSSION

The key distinction between religious greetings and customary or non-religious greetings lies in the origin of the celebrations. Celebrations rooted in religious practices and rituals, such as Christmas, Chap Goh Mei, Thaipusam, and Deepavali, involve religious greetings. On the other hand, customary greetings are derived from non-religious celebrations, which are steeped in traditions that have been passed down from earlier generations. For example, the Chinese New Year celebration falls into this category. Consequently, this difference between religious and non-religious origins of celebrations has an impact on the guidelines and rulings outlined by the Shariah.

There are only two festivals in Islam, namely Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. As narrated by Anas bin Malik in a hadith:

When the Prophet PBUH came to Medina, the people had two days on which they engaged in games. He asked: What are these two days (what is the significance)? They said: We used to engage ourselves in them in the pre-Islamic period. The Prophet PBUH said: Allah has substituted for them something better than them, the day of sacrifice (Eid al-Adha) and the day of the breaking of the fast (Eid al-Fitr). (Sunan Abi Dawud, Chapter of Prayer, No. 1134)

There are various celebrations based on different religions. These celebrations can be classified into two categories: religious celebrations and non-religious celebrations (Basri Ibrahim et al., 2016). A religious celebration is a festive occasion where religious rituals take precedence. This involves participating in worship ceremonies and adhering to customary practices inherent to the religion. Additionally, attending a church or temple often requires wearing specific attire or symbolic accessories, such as a Christian cross or a Hindu bindi—a red dot worn on the forehead. Examples of religious celebrations include Christmas, celebrated by Christians; Deepavali, celebrated by Hindus; and Chap Goh Mei, celebrated by Buddhists or Chinese communities. These celebrations, which have significant origins in religious culture, are celebrated widely in Malaysia.

Non-religious celebrations are occasions where customary practices and traditions hold greater prominence than religious rituals. This means the celebration follows the customs passed down from earlier generations, which over time may become laws or rules that must be followed. This interpretation elaborates on the meaning of the word 'custom', as reasoned by Basri Ibrahim et al. (2016). An example of a non-religious celebration is Chinese New Year, which the Chinese celebrate on the first day of the full moon according to the lunar calendar, falling between January 21st and February 19th. However, Alias and Anisah (2008) concluded that the Chinese New Year celebration is considered a religious celebration as the rituals and activities align with the religious demands and beliefs. Next, examples of such festivals include the Gawai festival, observed by the Iban and Bidayuh ethnic groups, which commemorates the conclusion of the harvesting season and pays homage to ancestral spirits. Additionally, there is the Harvest festival, traditionally celebrated by the Kadazan-Dusun ethnic community for generations to mark the successful completion of the rice harvest. According to Basri Ibrahim et al. (2016), these celebrations are considered non-religious by non-Muslims, as their descendants have practised them and hold beliefs inherited from their ancestors.

Therefore, this research proposes the following guidelines on greetings and prayers for non-Muslims:

Guidelines on Greetings to Non-Muslims:

1. Muslims are permitted to offer non-religious greetings to non-Muslims on any occasion.

2. Religious greetings are prohibited from use except under specific circumstances where there is a necessity to do so. Examples include a Muslim leader addressing non-Muslim citizens, a reverted Muslim wishing their non-Muslim family, and offering congratulations to a neighbour celebrating on occasion or other acceptable situations.
3. There are varying opinions among scholars on this matter; therefore, Muslims should exercise tolerance towards one another. Different circumstances may result in the application of different rulings.

Guidelines on Prayers to Non-Muslims:

1. Prayer to non-Muslims is only allowed if they are still alive. It is prohibited for non-Muslims who have already passed away.
2. Muslims are permitted to pray for non-Muslims who are still alive in three specific aspects: guidance, well-being, and seeking forgiveness.
3. Praying for forgiveness to non-Muslims who have passed away is prohibited.
4. Saying Rest in Peace (RIP) to non-Muslims is prohibited, as it implies a prayer for God's protection and mercy on the deceased soul and body.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data collected, the researchers can conclude that 153 respondents from Selangor have a fair understanding of the rulings regarding greetings and prayers for non-Muslims. Most of the respondents are aware of the Shariah guidelines, fatwa, and what is permissible for Muslims to practice while maintaining peace and harmony in society. Both Muslim and non-Muslim respondents agreed that not wishing someone on religious celebrations, as per the guidelines, does not imply disrespect; rather, it is viewed as a more tolerant approach.

There are several practical implications to consider when implementing guidelines on greetings and prayers involving non-Muslims. Firstly, as a Muslim living in a multiracial and multi-religious country like Malaysia, it is crucial to equip oneself with knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and its rulings regarding interactions with non-Muslims. This knowledge is essential to ensure that peace, stability, and harmony within society can be maintained. Muslims must understand that the current situation is significantly different from the time of Prophet Muhammad PBUH. The challenges have evolved, and advancements in technology, for instance, necessitate Muslims to be more critical and tolerant. However, this tolerance should not exceed the boundaries set by the Shariah guidelines, as preserving the religion is the primary objective (maqasid) that needs to be protected. Secondly, non-Muslims residing in a Muslim-majority country should also acquire knowledge about other religions. This applies equally to Muslims as well. The reason for this is to foster mutual understanding between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. By gaining knowledge about each other's religions and practices, both communities can develop a better appreciation and respect for one another.

Regarding the topic of rulings on greetings and prayers involving non-Muslims, there are two recommendations for future researchers to enhance understanding in this area. Firstly, it is advisable to be more specific about the district or location selected for data collection. This will help ensure that the data gathered is more reliable and valid. Future research could focus on a single targeted group with respondents from diverse professions, allowing for an examination of potential differences in the level of understanding based on profession. Secondly, the classification of celebrations based on their origin, whether predominantly religious or customary, will remain a challenging issue. Therefore, future research should include a comprehensive mechanism for identifying and categorizing celebrations. This is because, in the

present and future context, most celebrations may be observed more as trends rather than strictly religious practices. Consequently, conducting thorough research to identify and categorize the primary celebrations is highly recommended.

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