Potential Challenges of Interfaith Engagement: A Revisit to Al-Faruqi's Contribution

Dr Marina Munira Abdul Mutalib & Dr Roslizawati Mohd Ramly

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)
Email: marina.m@usim.edu.my & roslizawati@usim.edu.my

Abstract
In recent years, Malaysia and the rest of the globe have seen the rise of interfaith dialogue and engagements that include religious discourse, religious debate, scriptural reading, spiritual engagement, and literature on religions. It becomes a requirement for living a faithful life. The inter-religious dialogue, which enables people to listen to and converse with the other partner of religious organisations or communities, is an example of an interfaith engagement. The only goals of this involvement are to deepen one's convictions and obtain respect and understanding. Some of these engagements, nevertheless, have gone too far from the original objectives. Even still, each religion has unique goals, objectives, and methods for fostering peaceful coexistence with different faiths, which makes interfaith relations more challenging. Due to the diversified aims and current practices of inter-faith engagement, the paper attempts to investigate the contemporary challenges of interfaith relations. The method used in this article is a descriptive and analytical study. It highlights the background of interfaith relations, explore potential challenges of inter-religious engagements, and provides some solutions to these challenges from an Islamic perspective. The article will also discuss several solutions to these challenges, particularly from Ismail Raj al-Faruqi's point of view on his ethics for interfaith engagement. The findings conclude that interfaith engagement should encourage a practical approach that is fruitful with the result. It promotes a unique interaction of different religious groups to examine their religious background and contribute to humanity.
Keywords: Interfaith Engagements, Interfaith Dialogue, Potential Challenges, Ethics for Interfaith Engagement, Ismail Raj Al-Faruqi.

Introduction
Interfaith relations or some scholars may also use inter-religious engagement are pertinent in the world of religious communities. It plays a significant role in the religious landscape of plural society, especially in Malaysia. The activities include interfaith dialogue, debate, discussion meetings on religious topics, scriptural reading, spiritual engagement, and writings on religious elements. According to Ahmad Faizzuddin & Jaffary Awang (2014), interfaith

activities could be "providing discussion on social issues, interfaith awareness, raising, promoting good community relations, making statements on current issues, prayer/worship, social gathering, shared meals. Diversity training, educational events/ exhibitions, assisting on multi-faith civic ceremonies, providing advice to public bodies, acting as a consultative forum on local issues for local government, sending representatives to serve on local strategic initiatives and involvement in regeneration/ neighbourhood renewal work and the regular newsletter" (p.30).

Until today, interreligious dialogue has been of great importance and one of the effective ways to interact with the other partner of religious groups. It highlights the opportunity for the followers of different faiths to communicate and to listen to each other, getting to know and learning to understand the 'other'. Kurucan & Erol (2012) argues that interfaith dialogue enables religious people to approach their partners "in a spirit of tolerance, truthfulness, sincerity, love, respect and goodwill, without willing the other to accept our own beliefs or ideas" (p.20).

Moreover, religious dialogue has become the platform that allows people to be different and genuine; and experience the highest level of freedom to either engage in religious activities or not. It demands willingness or readiness from both parties from the early stage of the process. There will be no coercion if someone feels reluctant or still not ready to share or listen to others. Interfaith dialogue emphasizes good communication with people of different religions and cultures "to mitigate ignorance and interreligious misunderstanding" (Kurucan & Erol, 2012).

Interreligious dialogue has been fruitful in promoting mutual understanding among religions. Burrell (2004) also confirms that a vigorous interfaith engagement is abundant with the outcomes of gaining mutual respect convictions, mutual regard for each other as a person and seeking a common quest for truth. It is also a means to sustain the essence of harmony and cohesion in society (Faizzuddin & Awang, 2014).

One of the underlying rules for interfaith engagement is that it has never wished for an absolute agreement. Religious people work hard to establish this platform to help others be heard and respected no matter how far they have differed from others. It is the hallmark of interfaith engagement. Interfaith engagement supplies an exchange of views to mutually understand each other despite differences in belief (Kurucan & Erol, 2012. Yet, in some cases, interfaith engagement might go too far to make people tolerate differences, to the extent of abandoning religious doctrines and values.

Interfaith engagement aims to gain respect and understanding and strengthen one's religious belief. However, there is a tendency for a religious movement to deviate from these fundamental aims. Therefore, this paper aims to highlight the contemporary background of interfaith relations, investigate its potential challenges, and provide some solutions to these challenges from an Islamic perspective. It is to help foster positive relations among Malaysians in coping with diversity.

Research Problem

"As the interfaith movement grows, it is becoming increasingly important to discuss potential challenges of interfaith dialogue and how they can be addressed" (Aamir Hussain, 2014). In promoting religious harmony, interfaith engagement has been abundant with values for promoting respect, love, and understanding. However, some of the movements in interfaith engagement have been misleading in their approaches and strategies. Due to its outgrowing number of participations in interfaith relations, the paper attempts to highlight its

development and contemporary scenario. It has sustained throughout the challenging time of interfaith relations. Some may even deviate from their objectives of interfaith relations. The paper will lead the study to highlight the challenges of interfaith relations in facing religious pluralism.

Research Methodology
The method used in this research is an analytical study whereby selected readings on interfaith engagement will be thoroughly discussed. The article will also highlight the contemporary background of interfaith relations, explore potential challenges of inter-religious engagements, and provide some solutions to these challenges from an Islamic perspective. The article will also discuss several solutions to these challenges, particularly from the view of Ismail Raj al-Faruqi on his ethics for interfaith engagement.

The Background of Interfaith Engagement
The background of the interfaith relation in contemporary life has developed vigorously. It has been coloured with many approaches, meaningful strategies and aims due to the current circumstances and religious atmosphere of today. The tragedy of 9/11 and 7/7 has shown a drastic increase in interfaith activities (Faizzuddin & Awang, 2014).

Scholars suggest that interfaith engagement needs to regain its focus and goals (Hussain, 2014; Faizzuddin & Awang, 2014). It is due to the existing number of adherences who do not belong to a defined faith or spiritual belief. Aamir Hussain (2014) examines that the setting for inter-religious dialogue can be divided at least into two parts; the theological and the personal experience (or relating to values). The approach in theological debates is more on highlighting the theological discussion of a specific religion. It usually leads by the experts to read religious scriptures, deal with understanding the texts, and discuss theological issues (doctrines, the concept of God) where the discussion would be more thorough. Also, centres are set up in some regions of the world to promote interreligious activities and enhance public awareness and mutual understanding of traditions, practices, doctrines, and religious teachings of religions. It is for mutual understanding between adherence of different religions whereby the discussion includes teachings, rituals, tradition, and doctrines in a more specific and educational setting (Faizzuddin & Awang, 2014). Therefore, in this approach, people who participate should have basic knowledge and understanding of their neighbours from different religions and belief systems. It also helps to encourage relations among people through the distinctive features and common ground of these religions. However, some scholars believe that this type of inter-religious dialogue caters only for some segments of people in society and on an educational basis.

On the other hand, personal experience engagement is very much related to the values promoted in a defined faith which aims to have a common understanding based on these values. Besides, the setting of this interfaith engagement is unrestrained as compared to the theological debate. The audience is also open to anyone available in the society, who can share their experience, especially on the values promoted in the religion. Moreover, groups of humans work together to promote established values and to help humanity. This kind of informal interfaith setting promulgated by the religious community allows the society to build good relationships. The programmes promote humanitarian aid for the sick, the needy, broken families, and those financially incompetent in the neighbourhood or establish cooperation between the locals and the minorities. However, this personal experience of

inter-religious dialogue has stipulated challenges since it is not meant only for religious people and is open to anyone.

Sharpe (1874) further discusses the types of Interfaith dialogue in Christianity can be at least traced into four sections; 1. Human dialogue, 2. Secular dialogue, 3. Interior dialogue, 4. Discursive dialogue. In response to this division, Lazar (2005) explains the following types of dialogue as also recognized by the (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1984). The first division is called the dialogue of life in which people strive to live together as neighbours sharing problems and obstacles; 2. Dialogue of action is when people collaborate with others to help the poor, those who are discriminated against and needy in society; 3. The dialogue of heart where "persons rooted in their tradition shared their spiritual experience with others with regard prayer and contemplation"; 4. Dialogue of meaning (theological reflection) is the most intricate one, where religious experts share their traditions with others to promote respect and understanding<https://www.academia.edu./es/17813319/Challenges_and_Prospects_of_Interfaith_Dialogues (accessed May 19 2019)>.

The last two options, as also experienced by the Christian community, have been very challenging because they touch the sensitive area of dialogue in order "to accept the specific blessings in the others".

Potential Challenges of Interfaith Engagement

As mentioned before, every religion has distinct objectives, approaches, and strategies to work on a harmonious relationship. Moreover, since Vatican II made his fundamental proclamation of the Christian stance, this has also marked a new beginning for interreligious dialogue (Declaration Nostra Aetate, 1965).

The first potential challenge of Interfaith engagement discussed by Hussain (2014) is that all religious representatives need to widen their approach to interfaith engagement since it has no limitation to any particular religious group. The situation of today demands the audience of interfaith dialogue range from people who have a religion or faith to believe in; to those who do not have a belief system or any relation with a spiritual divine. Thus, "it is necessary to hold different ways of conversations, each geared to a different audience" (Amir Hussain, 2014). The challenge today is that all representatives must also address the so-called atheists, agnostics and so on.

A similar trend observed by Khursheed (1999), more and more people abandon their traditional boundaries due to the pluralistic challenge. People from different religious backgrounds can participate in multi-faith debates regardless of whether they are religious fundamentalists, liberalists, reformists or even those who disregard themselves with any religion. John Hick (1990) shared a similar outlook in his *Philosophy of Religion.* Hick outlines in his book that the scientific reasoning of God does not necessarily include those who have faith, as religion is only secondary. Hick even dismissed the philosophy of religion as an organ of religious teachings and thus bore the outcome that it should not necessarily stem from that standpoint. John Hick made it valid for the agnostic and atheistic, who may believe that the arguments are insufficient to believe in God (Hick, 1990).

The second is the challenge of compromising one's beliefs to be accepted in the interreligious setting. It is not new since scholars have discussed this issue even before. Many people struggled to fit into the situation of engaging with others. Due to the underlying modern values promoted by religious pluralism, some people have been away from its purpose. As mentioned in the previous section, every individual should be aware of the aims

of interreligious engagement to allow people to be different. Diversity has been a significant theme discussed in many chapters of religious texts. Thus, compromising one's belief to look tolerant is against the principles of interreligious engagement. It is a pertinent value to help people understand their religion better and appreciate differences. So, everyone who participates should also agree to disagree without imposing one's values on others.

In Islam, the Holy Book mentions that diversity is one of the pertinent characteristics of human society to have faith or a belief system. Islam encourages us to understand and acknowledge that God creates humans in diversity. There are two different values between acknowledging the differences around us and verifying the religious truth claims of others. Accepting the differences and approving the validity of other religions are not synonymous. The Muslims understand this from the verse of the Qur'an Chapter 109, verse 6, when Allah SWT says, "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion". The verse sent down by Allah SWT proclaims that the non-Muslims had offered a treaty to the Prophet Muhammad SAW. They were willing to worship Allah in a year if the Prophet SAW agreed to revere their many gods in the following year. Prophet Muhammad SAW straightway rejected the offer as it violates the fundamental beliefs of Islam (Kurucan & Erol, 2012).

Next is the challenge of proselytization which mostly happened to religions like Islam and Christianity. Most of the time, it is related to missionary religions like Christianity, Islam and so on. However, this attempt is considered antithetical to the idea of respecting and acknowledging each other's differences. It is recognized as a deceitful act, let alone if it is by force or an unethical move. Yet, some scholars may vary in their views, especially when promoting one's values or religion to others. Many religious representatives believe the mission is indispensable and incumbent on their tradition. For Muslims, verse 2:256 in the Holy Qur'an mentions that "there is no compulsion in religion". So long as there are no such acts to enforce one's ideas towards others, interreligious engagement is not forbidden.

On the other hand, Allah SWT calls upon the religious communities to find commonalities and to seek understanding and respect. In the Qur'an, Allah says: "Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship None but God; That we associate no partners with Him; That we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's Will) (The Qur'an, 3:64). "Although there may be a time and place for proselytizing (as in other traditions like Christianity), interfaith dialogue should not involve conversion in mind" (Hussain, 2014). Some scholars may vary in opinions on whether dialogue participants can proclaim absolute truth in their religion. After all, we can see many religious adherents profess the concept of everlasting truth since there will be no point in submitting oneself to that religion. Although one's feeling toward the superiority of religion is unavoidable, it requires an abstention from injuring others, be it in speech, action and so on. Instead of bluntly mentioning that "my religion is better than yours", one may highlight that this is one of the positive messages of my religion that I believe contains an everlasting truth (Ibrahim et.al., 2012).

Solutions to The Potential Challenges
Despite the variations of interfaith engagements and their underlying objectives, all parties should be prudent of the underlying goals. It allows people to decide which platform is the best for them and which activities they should avoid. Besides, wisdom is the key to maintaining justice in a multi-racial country (Zahid & Basri, 1991).

Al-Faruqi further outlined the ethics for interfaith engagement or dialogue (Fletcher, 2012). Al- Faruqi sets it clear from the beginning of the process that it must be on pure intention. The success of interfaith dialogue relies substantially on the sincerity of heart that both parties enjoined in the conversations. It is one of the outstanding lessons in any engagement of interfaith. Besides, it is a process of learning that is incumbent on ethical values. Abiding by the values enables both parties to achieve mutual understanding and better relationships for future endeavours. It is also a long-lasting engagement.

After sincerity, it comes respect. Al-Faruqi (1967) demonstrates that respect for everyone's religious teachings, rituals, and essential values will make people realize that everyone possesses the same status as a citizen of "the religious world community" (Zuriati & Engku Ahmad Zaki, 2012). In fact, Al-Faruqi's approach to meta-religion has demonstrated this value. It is a set of guidelines that are carried out in areas where there is a possible success i.e., the ethical duties (Al-Faruqi, 1968).

Al-Faruqi (1967) also urges the understanding of other faiths in ways acceptable to the adherent. This is because no true dialogue can occur without such an accurate understanding. As for Islam and Christianity, al-Faruqi explicates that only through dialogue, both religions can be united in truth. Therefore, conversion to the truth is the main agenda of dialogue (al-Faruqi, 1968). This understanding can be achieved by practising *epochè* i.e., suspension of judgement or personal belief.

Moreover, to evaluate the truth claim of any religion, al-Faruqi proposed that such evaluation must be made based on universal principles which are rational and scientific. Islam and Christianity, both claims they have the truth, which according to logic is impossible. Therefore, dialogue should become the means for comprehending the truth (Al-Faruqi, 1968). The principles designed in his meta-religion are philosophical; if applied can evaluate the truth claim of any religion based on how close they adhere to values and corresponding morality. Hence, religion is not necessarily true and false, but each is at a different degree or level of attaining values (Fletcher, 2012).

Al-Faruqi (1968) also outlines the principles of dialogue which are as follows
1. No religious pronouncement is beyond critique (ex-cathedra).
It means that all religious statements are to be criticized that no dogmatic or authoritarian statement is accepted. This is essential to permit critical inquiry into the most central beliefs held by a religious system. The internal coherence of one's religion is necessary. According to al-Faruqi, God's commands are responsive to humans, whereby it is important for a man to find justifications and explanations from the divine revelation which correspondent to moral freedom and rational conviction.

2. There must not be self-contradiction within a religion. (Internal coherence)
Self-contradiction is against the essence of religion and is fatal to any system (Al-Faruqi, 1999). It means that the values in religion itself must have coherence and cannot contradict each other to ensure validity and truthfulness. In his meta-religion, al-Faruqi maintains the consistency of what he called "ideal and actual being".

3. Proper historical perspective must be maintained (external coherence).
The system or faith presented must resemble a coverage of human understanding of religion, history, logic, and the context of the human situation of life and knowledge. In other words,

it must correspond with reality. Therefore, what is considered truth by religion should also be actual or real facts (Oniah, 2012).

4. Permit the exploration of dogmatic and normative concepts not to reject them but as the spirit of freedom from a definitive interpretation of the revelation. Faruqi opens interreligious engagement in a meaningful platform to allow two parties to understand and explore the fundamental doctrines of each religion. Moreover, interreligious activities should rely fundamentally on scripture and reliable sources.

5. Dialogue is conducted in areas where there is a possibility of success, such as ethical values. al-Faruqi has set from the beginning that anyone who starts the engagement should always be remindful of the consequences of good and ethical dialogue. It enhances mutual understanding, respect for each other and a good relationship in future. The openness of interfaith dialogue must be in a genuine and transparent setting.

As far as interfaith engagement is concerned, it should encourage a practical approach that is fruitful with the result. Al-Faruqi asserts that religion should affect human lives as it is the source of human values. The idea of separating religion from intervening in human's everyday life will never sustain a meaningful engagement. Moreover, interfaith engagement presupposes a unique interaction of different religious groups to examine their religious background and contribute to humanity. Interfaith engagement is proof of humanness (Kurucan & Erol, 2012). Prophet Muhammad SAW was a model of positive engagement among people of a multi-religious society long before he was appointed the Prophet. The title of a *l-Sadiq al-Amin* (truthful and trustworthy) fits his very personality from the beginning. Prophet Muhammad SAW has shown examples that his engagement with others is not only for the sake of the Book of Wisdom; it is an act of the innate disposition that God creates for all human beings. This good spirit binds humanity with love, truthfulness, respect, wisdom, and reason. It saves humanity from religious enmity, hatred, and blasphemy.

Other challenges of interfaith engagement, the authorities must be prudent of so-called religious or spiritual attempts aimed at false proselytization. Scrutinize measures need implementation, particularly in those engagements involved with the susceptible target such as the illiterates, weak and needy. This sort of interfaith engagement is deemed unethical and deceitful. On the other hand, it is a process of learning that allows rational interaction. A proselytization-free activity will give more space for good interaction between humans. It guarantees both parties understand, interact and experience dignity with respect.

The need for interfaith engagement today has been critical in the unstable state of the political and socio-religious background of the world. The current situation in some places has impacted the relationship among religious communities. Therefore, interfaith engagement should be one of the meaningful tools to foster good relationships and interaction with others. In fact, due to this current situation, there is a need to establish various dialogue groups and interfaith bodies to reduce tensions or fear in society. It will help the community to appreciate the religious teachings of the religion and differentiate them from the acts of its followers (Faizzuddin & Awang, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenges of interfaith engagement are varied and challenging in this postmodern period. Everything seems to be relative. Scholars of interfaith engagement also endeavour to maintain its values vis-a-vis contemporary life. The paper has discussed the importance of scrutinizing the approaches to interreligious dialogue. Due to the diversified aims and current practices of interfaith engagement, the paper attempted to investigate the contemporary challenges of interfaith relations. It has examined the backgrounds of interfaith relations, its underlying attributes and some of the challenges in recent years. Whatever the religious group's aim, it is so important that it never deviates from the values and ethics of dialogue. It eventually bears consequences and manages future attempts with other religious groups.

The article has also discussed several solutions to these challenges, particularly from the view of Ismail Raj al-Faruqi on his ethics for interfaith engagement. Al-Faruqi is concerned with the genuine intention between both parties from the early setting of interreligious dialogue as it reflects the end process with beneficial and remarkable outcomes. It is hoped that the solutions will ensure positive relationships between religious groups and that they engage in a multi-faith society in harmony and respect.

References

Ramli, A. F., & Awang, J. (2014). The Practices and Approaches of Interfaith Dialogue at Leicester. *Journal of Human Development and Communication.* 3((Special Issue), 77-95. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308743675_The_Practices_and_Approaches_of_Interfaith_Dialogue_At_Leicester_UK. [accessed Oct 21, 2020].

Burrell, D. (2004). *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective: Challenges in Contemporary Theology.* Blackwell Publishing.

Fletcher, C. (2012). Muslim Interfaith Dialogue in the Twenty-first Century: Building on the Contributions and Legacy of Isma'il Al- Faruqi" in Imtiyaz Yusuf *(Ed.)*, *Islam and Knowledge: Al-Faruqi's Concept of Religion in Islamic Thought*, (pp. 157-176). I.B. Tauris.

Hick, J. (1990). *Philosophy of Religion.* Prentice Hall.

Hussain, A. (2014). *The Challenges of Interfaith Dialogue.* https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-challenges-of-interfaith-dialogue [accessed Oct 21, 2020].

Mutalib, M. M. A., & Ramly, R. M. (2023). Potential Challenges of Interfaith Engagement: A Revisit to Al-Faruqi's Contribution. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *13*(7), 1170 – 1179.

Kamaruzaman, K. O. (2012). From Interfaith Dialogue to Theological Discourse: Al-Faruqi's Legacy in Interfaith Engagements, in Imtiyaz Yusuf *(Ed.)*, *Islam and Knowledge: Al-Faruqi's Concept of Religion in Islamic Thought*, pp. 243-268. I.B. Tauris, 2012.

Khursheed, A. (1999). Crossing Religious Boundaries: Interfaith Challenges for the Future. *Singapore Baha'i Studies Review,* Vol. 4, pp. 105-189.

Kurucan, A., & Erol, M. K. (2012). *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an, Sunnah, History.* Dialogue Society.

Lazar, R. (2005). *Challenges and Prospects of Interfaith Dialogue in a Postmodern Multi-Religious Context (Interfaith Dialogue in India after Nostra Aetate),* https://www.academia.edu./es/17813319/Challenges_and_Prospects_of_Interfaith_Dialogues [accessed May 19, 2019].

Sharpe, E. (1974). The Goals for Interreligious Dialogue in John Hick (Ed.) *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims,* pp.77-95. Sheldon Press.