

https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.24.2023.279			
Received:	6 June 2023	Accepted:	25 Nov. 2023
Revised:	1 July 2023	Published:	15 Dec. 2023
Volume:	(24 (December))	Pages:	168-178
To cite: Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman & Nur Solehah Shapie. 2023. Religious tolerance conceptual framework: Malaysian religious leaders and scholars' perspective. <i>International Journal of Islamic Thought</i> . Vol. 24 (Dec.): 168-178.			

Religious Tolerance Conceptual Framework: Malaysian Religious Leaders and Scholars' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Religious tolerance is an important element in developing the balance and harmony of Malaysia's pluralistic society. Despite this, there are still some irresponsible parties that continuously advocate sensitive issues, especially religious rights, that cause intolerance in society. This situation has contributed to the generation of negative impacts on inter-religious relationships among the communities in Malaysia. Thus, this paper aims to discuss the religious tolerance framework for Muslim and non-Muslim relations in Malaysia. This study uses qualitative methods and a phenomenological research design. The goal of the phenomenological approach is to understand the subject of the study through their views and perspectives. The information from this interview is the main data for this research. A total of 13 representatives and experts from each major religion in Malaysia, namely Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist (represented by mufti academics, scholars, and religious leaders), were involved as informants for this study. The interview method conducted with 13 religious representatives in Malaysia will be analysed to get their perceptions on the formation of religious tolerance guidelines in Malaysia. This study found that in the context of the conceptual understanding of religious tolerance, Muslim and non-Muslim communities emphasise three main values: respect, forgiveness, and doing good deeds. They understand that religious tolerance means adhering to one's own religion, respecting the religious beliefs of others, and being willing to forgive and do good deeds for those of different religions. This form of understanding of the meaning of tolerance refutes the concept of religious pluralism, which promotes the idea of unity among all religions as a way to establish religious tolerance in a society.

Keyword: *Conceptual Framework, Dialogue, Interfaith, Tolerance, Malaysia.*

Malaysia is a country made up of people of various religions. Therefore, religious tolerance is an important component in building a harmonious relationship between religious believers. Discussions about tolerance in Malaysia must prioritise the Federal Constitution as a guiding principle in implementing religious tolerance. There are two Articles in the Federal Constitution that touch on the relationship between religious believers. First, Article 3 of the Federal Constitution stipulates that Islam is the religion of the Federation, but other religions can be

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practised peacefully in any part of the Federation (Federal Constitution 1963: 20). Second, religious tolerance can be found in Article 11 of the Federal Constitution as follows (Federal Constitution 1963: 27):

1. Every person has the right to follow and practise his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to develop it.
2. No one can be forced to pay any tax whose revenue is specially allocated in whole or in part for the purposes of a religion other than his own.
3. Each religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs, establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes, acquire or own property, and hold and administer it in accordance with the law.
4. State laws and, in relation to the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan, and Putrajaya, federal laws can control or restrict the development of any religious doctrine or belief among people who follow Islam.
5. This matter does not allow any act contrary to any general law related to public order, public health, or moral principles.

Based on the list above, it shows that the Federal Constitution supports the spirit of religious tolerance in Malaysia. At the same time, Clause 4 in Article 11 becomes a limitation on the religious freedom granted. Adherents of other religions are free to practise their religion in peace and harmony. However, it is not allowed to spread among Muslims in Malaysia. This refers to Article 3, which places Islam as the federal religion and aims to make Islam sovereign without neglecting the interests and virtues of other religions.

The government's efforts are further strengthened with the creation of the National Unity Policy 2021. This policy has three main objectives: building relationships between plural societies in Malaysia. First, it aims to strengthen national unity and integration based on the Federal Constitution and Rukun Negara. Second, forming a national identity with the spirit of identity, patriotism, concern, tolerance, mutual respect, and responsibility. Third, produce Malaysians who respect and practise unity. So, this policy is based on three main cores: patriotism and democracy, national identity, and the unity ecosystem. Each of these three cores has its own strategy to ensure that objectives can be achieved. For the first core (patriotism and democracy), the strategy is to improve literacy, understanding, and appreciation of the Federal Constitution and Rukun Negara as the basis of life practise, improve understanding and appreciation of Malaysian history, and strengthen national integration. The second core (national identity) focuses on strengthening the role of language as a medium of unity and integration and strengthening understanding of religion, culture, and customs of various ethnicities. Finally, the third core (Cohesion Ecosystem) strives to strengthen the effectiveness of communication to increase social awareness in the community, maintain, build, and strengthen the site of unity integration, empower the machinery of unity through strategic cooperation, strengthen and empower family and community institutions, improve law enforcement laws and the effectiveness of monitoring mechanisms, and strengthen the role of leaders as a catalyst for unity (Ministry of National Unity 2021: 18-20).

Religious tolerance requires active interaction or communication between religious individuals or groups (Mualim, Jaffary & Ibrahim 2014: 46). The relationship between religious tolerance among Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia is seen as being at a moderate level. Religious people can communicate and deal with daily life well. In fact, it is a common practise in religious communities in Malaysia to mutually attend celebrations such as festivals and weddings, as well as visit the funerals of followers of different religions. In addition, previous studies also show that religious believers in Malaysia also have a high attitude of religious tolerance, positive perceptions and attitudes, and are ready to tolerate people of different religions (Nur Farhana 2016: 180). This religious tolerance relationship scenario is seen as needing to be emphasised from time to time so that harmonious relationships in a pluralistic society can be maintained and improved. Especially in the aspect of maintaining one's own religious identity while at the same time respecting the religious beliefs of others.

Religious Tolerance Polemic

The implementation of religious tolerance faces some polemics among them, such as:

1. *Differences in the understanding of the concept of religious tolerance.* Religious tolerance is understood with various definitions and interpretations. In general, religious tolerance is seen from two perspectives. First, religious tolerance means respecting and celebrating the diversity of religions that exist (plurality). Second, accepting religious tolerance by generalising all religions is true. There is confusion in understanding the concept of religious tolerance, whether it is a tendency towards simply accepting plurality (diversity of religions) or tending to a concept that generalises the truth of all religions (Earnie Elmie, Kamarudin & Nur Farhana 2018: 151). Based on the description above, the difference in understanding in defining religious tolerance certainly gives different reactions to the form of religious tolerance that is to be implemented in Malaysia. There are some views in Malaysia that understand tolerance as being more inclined towards religious pluralism. For example, Lee Ban Chen, in his writing entitled 'History as the Final Judge,' thinks that the Muslim society should have a relative, open, and plural truth and that it is necessary to separate authority between religious affairs and the state. So, with that path, national progress can be achieved in various aspects, including in the relationship between religious believers. This includes issues of religious freedom, pluralism, relative truth, and the interpretation of scripture. All these matters are subject to the methods and methodologies outlined in Islam.
2. *Excessive demands in the name of religious tolerance.* Among the examples of issues that are said to be claimed by some parties in the name of religious tolerance but end up causing controversy. Such as demand by COMANGO (Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process) in 2013 during the Universal Periodic Review process, the Human Rights Council under the United Nations (United Nations) held in the process on October 24, 2013 in Geneva. The report presented by COMANGO urges the Malaysian government to sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The ICCPR Article contains the rights of religious freedom, which give freedom to choose a religion or belief, including the right of a person to change his religion (Muhammad Rashidi 2017: 27). Next in 2018, COMANGO (2018: 19) in the 3rd Universal Periodic Review report of the Human Rights Council has demanded that the law of apostasy and religious conversion be revised by removing the law and cancelling the need for a rehabilitation process for those who want to leave Islam. This shows a consistent stance demanding the right to freedom of religion, which should be seen together with the right to Islam as the federal religion, and the characteristic feature of the Malays must be Islam in Malaysia.

Based on the polemic above, this writing aims to discuss the religious tolerance conceptual framework according to the understanding of Malaysian religious leaders in the Malaysian context.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study that uses a phenomenological design. Among the data collection instruments for this study are a long interview (in-depth interview), which is triangulated with a group discussion instrument (focus group discussion), and document analysis. However, for the purposes of this article, only the data and data analysis from the interview method are discussed. In this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews. This is because the use of this interview is more flexible, which allows the informant to explain what he thinks to the researcher, especially in questions to obtain information on tolerance in Malaysia. To collect socio-demographic data such as age and education level, structured interview questions are used. There are several procedures that are followed to obtain good interview results, namely, the researcher will distribute an undertaking form stating that the informant's name will be kept confidential

and only for the purpose of this study. In addition, the selected informants are also religious representatives and experts who have a strong background in the administration of their respective religions in order to obtain more accurate information, especially in expressing opinions related to inter-religious issues. The selection of respondents was purposefully done (sampling) with the aim of seeing the views of groups that are directly involved in the interaction between religions in Malaysia. While the number of respondents is determined by data saturation because this is a qualitative study that measures data saturation as a benchmark for good data, Data saturation, according to Creswell (1998), is achieved by looking at the answers to the given research questions until the same answers are repeated in the informant's data. So the study will select representatives of religious leaders who are chosen by their respective religious leaders, especially those who are in the Malaysian Harmony and Unity Committee (JKMPKA). A total of 13 representatives and experts from each major religion in Malaysia, namely Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist (represented by mufti academics, scholars, and religious leaders), were involved as informants for this study. Symbol M represents Muslim informants, K represents Christian informants, B represents Hindu informants and B represents Buddhist informants. The number next to the symbol represents the number of informants according to religion. The interview method conducted with 13 religious' representatives in Malaysia was analysed thematically to form a framework for the implementation of religious tolerance in Malaysia.

Result and Discussion

Concept of Religious Tolerance: Muslim Informants

Based on the interview results, combining the terms 'tolerance' and 'religion' carries different meanings. This point was differentiated by informant M6 by describing that religious tolerance and religious tolerance are two different terms. According to him, 'religious tolerance' means tolerating the doctrines and theologies of other religions that are not allowed in Islam. Such a definition is in line with the understanding of religious pluralism, which is to agree that the truth of all religions is the same. The context of this definition is rejected in Islam because it is against the creed that places Allah SWT as the One God Meanwhile, 'religious tolerance' is an attitude of tolerance in relations between religious believers. Next, the definition of the term religious tolerance also has different connotations, whether it tends to have a positive or negative meaning. On the positive side, the definition of religious tolerance has various terms that are used, but from the point of view of meaning, they lead to the same goal. So it is agreed by Muslim informants M2 and M5 that there is a need for a specific parameter or indicator to give a meaning that is more appropriate to the situation and atmosphere in Malaysia.

The interview results from the Muslim informant concluded that there are four main themes at the basis of religious tolerance: respect, understanding, love, and common values.

1. *Respect*: Informant M2 put religious tolerance as synonymous with the meaning of *Tasamuh* in Arabic, which is mutual tolerance. *Tasamuh* means to forgive each other, which is tolerating, and sorry is an effect or reaction to respect for others. In addition, this was also emphasised by informant M4 and M6: religious tolerance means respecting differences of opinion (agreeing to disagree) or agreeing with the differences that exist with each other. This is based on Al-Quran, al-Kafirun (109): 6, which is referred to by informant M4 as the pillar of religious tolerance, namely: "For you, your religion, and for me, my religion "Based on this verse, it shows Islam's stance towards other religions by accepting the existence of religious differences and each person's own beliefs without the element of coercion or religious mixing. These differences in religious beliefs are greeted with mutual respect. Ibn Katsir (2004) interprets the above verse to indicate that following a religion other than Islam is a form of choice and can also happen through lineage and descent, such as for Jews and Christians. This Surah al-Kafirun was revealed because polytheists had offered the Prophet SAW to worship their God and Allah SWT in turn every year. So, this verse is an affirmation from the Prophet SAW that there is no

mixing or tolerance in matters related to the faith of Muslims. At the same time, non-Muslims can continue their own beliefs and practises. At the same time, this verse rejects tolerance in the form of religious pluralism.

2. *Understanding* : One of the important elements in forming religious tolerance. This was explained by informants M2 and M5. In general, the atmosphere and customs of the local population must be understood first before fulfilling the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims. In particular, when issues or benefits arise that involve religious affairs among followers of different religions in one place, The implementation of jurisprudence in a place where the majority of the population is Muslim is different from the population where the minority is Muslim. In addition, the atmosphere of a family consisting of mixed marriages or family members of the *mualaf* group is different from that of a family whose entire members are Muslims. Therefore, the jurisprudence approach and the management of certain issues related to religion must be well managed based on the guidance of the Quran, the Sunnah, and the correct and appropriate method of fiqh. All these things require a clear understanding of the sensitivity of custom, culture, and religion in the local community. In addition, the result of this understanding also makes an individual be kind to others, as stated by informant M6 in his interview. In the other explanation, supposedly, the higher the level of understanding of other religions, the more tolerant and appreciative they are. This is because a kind attitude makes it easy for an individual to do good to others. A bad attitude only causes prejudice and increases the racial gap, as well as being a sign of intolerance.
3. *Love*: Love emphasising two main values: doing good to others and getting to know each other among followers of various religions. The value of doing good is emphasised by informant M6 by referring to Al-Quran. al-Mumtahanah (60): 8, which means: "God does not forbid you from doing good and being fair to those who do not fight you because of (your) religion and does not expel you from your hometown; indeed, God loves those who act justly." al-Mahalliy and al-Suyuti (2003) interpret the phrase 'those who do not fight you' in the above verse to refer to non-Muslims who do not fight Islam. Thus, Allah SWT does not prohibit Muslims from doing good and even being fair to non-Muslims. In the same verse, it gives limitations on doing good and acting justly as long as non-Muslims do not fight and oppress Muslims unjustly. In addition, the element of love is also obtained through the willingness and readiness to recognise each other between these communities of various religions and races. Matters are part of Islamic teachings, as Informant M6 has referred to the following chapters (Al-Quran, Hujurat 49:13) & (Al-Quran , Ar Rum (30) : 22).
4. *Common Values*: Informants M5 and M6 who agree that religious tolerance can be fostered when this multi-religious community shares common and universal values. This means that all the good values that are agreed upon by religion should be shared and become an opening for religious believers to cooperate with each other in maintaining harmony and the welfare of the country. These universal values can also be applied in the national education system, such as the concepts of fairness, tolerance, love, and moderation.

Concept of Religious Tolerance: Buddhist Informants

Tolerance, according to Buddhist teachings, means respecting the views and practices of non-Buddhists without prejudice or negative prejudice. However, if there are Buddhists who cannot appreciate the practice of other religions, they are advised to distance themselves to avoid any form of criticism This is evidenced by the fact that in spreading Buddhism for 2500 years, the Buddha used neither force nor coercion in accepting his teachings, but introduced those teachings in a peaceful environment and there was no bloodshed between humans or animals Tolerance is

also linked to love for yourself and others. Buddha advocated mutual love among Buddhists and followers of other religions. This should first be cultivated in oneself so that it can be more easily and practically passed on to others. With the presence of love within oneself, one will be able to overcome problems and provide assistance to all involved, without discrimination based on race, religion, or colour. Based on the interviews with Buddhist informants, there are several values for understanding of the concept of religious tolerance such as:

1. *Mutual Understanding*: In general, B2 and B3 assume that religious tolerance must be based on a good mutual understanding. There is even a frequent repetition of the word "understanding" by B3 in his interview. This shows that understanding is an important element in taking the first steps towards religious tolerance. Religious tolerance itself is seen as a universal value that should be practiced by all religious adherents around the world. Informant B3 also understands religious tolerance to mean acceptance of the fact that there is a plurality of religions worldwide. In fact, this is consistent with the basic tenets of Buddhism, which assume that all different religions lead to the same truth (religious pluralism). But it can be achieved in different ways. Therefore, the implementation of religious tolerance for Buddhists is open and consistent with the inclusive values of their own religion.
2. *Use Benevolence (Muhibah) Instead of Tolerance*: Benevolence: However, the results of the interview revealed that informant B3 disagreed with the use of the term tolerance to describe efforts to build good relationships between religious believers. In fact, the term tolerance is seen as having a negative connotation, meaning having to accept something even if you don't like it. Because for informant B3, tolerance is just the first step that must go hand in hand with the value of patience (patience) before getting to know another religion. Based on this, informant B3 suggested an alternative that was considered more appropriate and friendly when describing religious tolerance in Malaysia. Firstly, with the concept of MUHIBAH. MUHIBAH is an acronym with the following meanings: dialogue, kinship, harmony, sincerity, mutual trust, integrity and respect. The concept of MUHIBAH was the main agenda of the Ministry of National Unity until the establishment of the Committee for Promoting Understanding and Harmony among Religious Adherents on February 24, 2010. The concept of MUHIBAH is considered to be one of the best mechanisms for establishing consensus relationships between plural societies by making mutual love, affection and coexistence the basis.
3. *Acceptance*: the use of the term acceptance. Acceptance according to informant B3 is to accept something as it is with open arms. Without feeling forced and uncomfortable. Religious tolerance can be implemented well if each individual understands their respective positions and plays their role with full responsibility. So, informant B3 thinks that by accepting this kind of stance, there is no issue of forced 'tolerance' because each party accepts the differences that have existed between humans for a long time. In conclusion, informant B3 concluded that the step towards religious tolerance is to tolerate with patience, then learn to understand each other, and finally reach the highest level of relationship which is acceptance.

Concept of Religious Tolerance: Hindu Informants

Hinduism emphasizes tolerance in achieving harmony among people of multiple religions and races. Therefore, the doctrine that is the axis of tolerance in Hinduism is called 'Catur Purasa Artha'. The policy has covered all other policies or principles such as 'Moksha, Artha Kama and Dharma'. Through this basis, an individual can obtain the sufficiency and perfection of life that includes the family and society. According to Putu Sabda Jayendra (2014) the concept and definition of tolerance from a Hindu point of view by defining it as an attitude of a person who wants to be patient towards other people's beliefs and moral principles that are different. In other

words, with such an attitude an individual cannot easily deny the expression or words of someone who is true in terms of belief or belief. In addition, tolerance is an attitude of mutual respect, mutual understanding, appreciation and acceptance of various forms of differences in other societies, both in matters related to religion, belief and culture as well as ways and lifestyles. So it can be seen that the concept and definition of tolerance has focused on specific individuals, with application to the community and the general public. In addition to carrying the values that guide the direction in tolerance has immediately become the root in the maintenance of harmony.

In Hinduism, tolerance brings meaning to differences in beliefs and beliefs in terms of oneness and faith in God. Diversity is a habit in Hinduism, this is because the absence of a founder and based on the belief in the trinity of divinity has manifested the willingness of Hinduism to accept diversity. For Hinduism, this religion is owned by each individual and they are free to take good from any other religion to practice together with Hinduism. Even tolerance according to the eyes of the Hindu religion from a historical point of view is unholy, this is because of the demands that centre on the interests of each individual himself (Nur Farhana & Khadijah : 2013). Based on interviews with Hindu informants, it was found that:

1. *Using word of acceptance not tolerance:* The use of the term tolerance was not agreed upon by H2. This is because tolerance is viewed as a form of acceptance of something that is forced or unwilling. Therefore, H2 suggests that the relationship between religious believers is more appropriate using the concept of acceptance, which is defined as acceptance of the existing similarities and differences that have long existed in society. Informant H2 frequently repeats the term "acceptance" emphasizing the use of more specific terms to describe the relationship between religious believers in Malaysia. According to Hindu informants, the concept of religious tolerance should also focus on the values of patience, equality, respect and togetherness.
2. *Love:* Informant H1 said these principles are the priority in maintaining love for one another and avoiding cruelty by advocating a reasonable and reasonable, even fair, approach from all angles and aspects. H1 and H2 conclude that, Thus, five characteristics of religious tolerance were identified in the interviews of informants H1 and H2, namely: celebrating differences, respecting one another, doing good to all living beings, knowing the limits of each religion, and appreciating the people around.

Concept of Religious Tolerance: Christian Informants

According to Christian Perspective, the term tolerance is also said to be negative. Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman and Khadijah Mohd Khambali@Hambali (2016) which is stated in the article "Readiness of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders in Forming Religious Harmony: Requirements and Limitations", concluded that Christian religious leaders agree that Christian and Muslim relations need something that goes beyond tolerance, which is only the basis for building a good and harmonious relationship. Thus, the representative of the religious leader suggested that the terms respect and celebrate are more appropriate terms to replace "tolerance. However, it does not mean that Christian religious leaders reject tolerance; even the practise of tolerance coincides with Jesus' teachings that emphasise the concept of love. What should be understood here is that Christian religious leaders do not reject the practice of religious tolerance but only disagree with the use of the term. In relation to that, the findings from this interview session conducted by the researcher with Christian informant regarding the definition and concept of tolerance are as explained:

1. *Tolerance is a negative connotation:* Based on the definition and views of the Christian informant, informant K1 is a Christian religious leader of the Catholic denomination who accepts the use of the term tolerance in the context of religious tolerance. However, he also noted that the word tolerance is not explicitly named and mentioned in Christian

teachings and scriptural sources, but is included in the main concept of the Christian teachings of Jesus, namely the concept of love or also known as the concept of Love. As for the K2 informant who represents Protestant Christian religious leaders, he disagrees with the use of the term tolerance, which is seen as the lowest level in the chain of building harmonious relationships between religions. He recommended using the terms "respect" and "celebration" better as they represent a higher level than the level of tolerance as there are elements of togetherness in both terms. To further support his view, the informant also stated that the United Nations, as the authoritative organization in the relationship between race and religion, had also proposed the same term. It was noted that the term tolerance has negative connotations in the context of inter-religious relations in Christianity. From their point of view, tolerance is also the lowest level in the context of a relationship, although there are opinions.

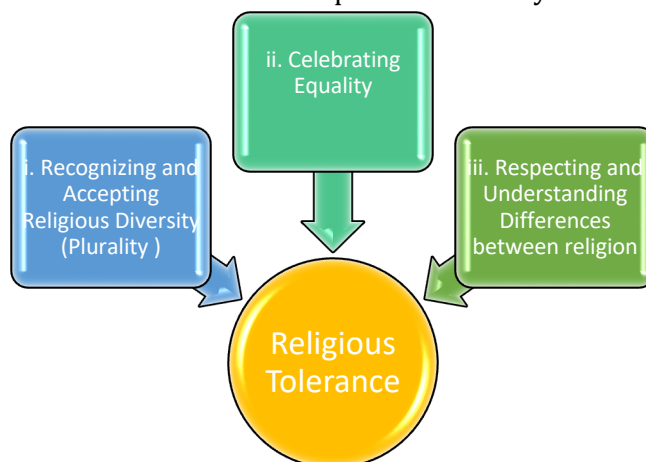
2. *Respect and celebrate:* K1 said that tolerance is also the lowest level in the context of a relationship, although there are opinions that say that tolerance is part of the concept of love in Christian teaching. In addition, the representative of the Catholic-Christian religious leader said that mutual respect between communities (respect), despite different religious beliefs, ideologies, etc., is important in the concept of tolerance. K2 said: the majority of Christian religious leaders are more encouraged to use the terms "respect" and "celebration" to build a positive and stronger understanding between religions. In his opinion, we shouldn't marginalize or push aside any group because human beings are brothers and so it's natural for us to be kind to everyone.
3. *Mutual understanding:* Next, the concept of tolerance mentioned by informant K1 is mutual understanding. According to him, true understanding is very important in order to understand the teachings of other religions so that there is no misunderstanding. This understanding attitude must be learned in order to see the validity and importance of something contained in other religions. Mutual understanding was also recognized by informant K2 as one of the concepts of tolerance. Based on his observations, this attitude of mutual understanding must be applied in the relationship between religions through the exchange of information and views about each religion in order for the community to understand each other.

Conceptual Framework of Religious Tolerance

Based on the above views of representatives of religious leaders, religious tolerance is a necessity in any relationship between religious diversity. Religious tolerance can only be successfully implemented when these three elements are applied:

1. *Religious diversity is recognized.* The terms love, respect, justice, and acceptance bear witness to differences that need to be respected. This means that religious tolerance in the Malaysian context does not lead to the belief that all religions are equally true.
2. *Equalities are celebrated.* The term celebration is repeatedly suggested by informants, especially non-Muslim informants. For non-Muslims, tolerance alone is not enough to describe the process that needs to be implemented to promote harmony in Malaysia's religious diversity. They claim it is just a basic effort, the process of celebration is more than just tolerance
3. *Differences are respected.* The term mutual understanding is suggested by all informants. Understanding not only fosters tolerance but also more respect, so that harmony among religious believers continues to flourish.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Religious Tolerance from Religious Leader Perspectives in Malaysia



Source: Nur Farhana & Nur Solehah (2023)

Based on the discussion above, when it comes to the concept of religious tolerance from the perspective of Islam and non-Muslims, there is a slight difference in how the term is used. According to Muslim leaders, the term tolerance is viewed positively as an attempt to build relationships with adherents of other religions. Meanwhile, the majority of non-Muslim leaders view the term tolerance as having negative connotations and as inadequate to describe good relations between religious believers. Therefore, some other terms are suggested, such as Benevolence, Acceptance, Celebration, Understanding, and Respect. However, the use of the term is not the main pillar in the implementation of religious tolerance. It is about the appreciation and implementation by all those involved to promote a sense of community among themselves. After conducting the interviews, the researcher found that Muslim and non-Muslim leaders also share common values and characteristics in understanding how religious tolerance should be implemented among religious believers in Malaysia.

Acknowledgment

This work is a contribution from the research fund of the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia through the project Frgs/1/2017/ss06/ukm/03/1 Religious Tolerance according to Religious Leaders in Malaysia

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