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Converts play key role in racial harmony

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IN 1987 there were five billion of us on this earth. Thirteen years later on July 19 1999, at 12:24:02am GMT, the earth's population, according to the US Census Bureau, reached six billion. Of these, 1.4 billion are Chinese.

This is a sensitive issue because every religion, it seems, employs different methods of counting members, so statistics of the world's religions are at best only very rough approximations.

Christianity appears to have more followers than any other, closely followed by Islam. Then come Hinduism and Buddhism. Nearly a billion people are agnostics (887 million), and then there are the atheists (222 million).

Islam is the second largest (and fastest growing) of the three major monotheistic faiths and its followers are never ever called Mohamedans. They are known as Muslims.

Islam means "surrender to the will of Allah", and like Christianity, Judaism and other religions, good deeds will be rewarded in paradise, and evil doers go to hell unless forgiven by the all-powerful God. Only He judges, no one else.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says Malaysia is "a modern and tolerant Islamic nation", but Pas has unequivocally declared that it wants to convert this "modern and tolerant nation" into a puritanical Islamic theocratic state if it comes to power with the help of DAP, Keadilan and Parti Rakyat in 2004.

The three Pas confederates say they are opposed to Pas' declaration. Then these so-called multi-racial parties should leave Pas to be on its own and form a new axis.

I decided to write this article following a meeting with a born Chinese Muslim from Turkey, married to a born Malaysian Chinese Muslim, simply to fill a wide gap in the existing literature on Malaysian politics, race relations and religions.

It is intended to illuminate a problem seldom (if ever) investigated, an interesting, complex issue which ultimately can contribute to greater racial harmony and religious tolerance here.

I have just found out that Rosey Ma Wang Le Li has been actively researching, writing and lecturing on Chinese Muslims in Malaysia. She asked to see me and we got together last week.

Rosey Ma was persuasive, if a bit anxious. I don't need to go into the details of what she said, but what she said has relevance.

I generally agree with her, even more so after I read her paper on "Chinese Muslims in Malaysia" which she presented at Academia Sinica's Third International Conference on Sinology in Taipei last year.

Amid our 23 million people about six millions are Chinese - I thought the number was larger. Never mind, let us wait for the final tabulation by the Census Department.

But this has alarmed Dr Ng Yen Yen (MCA's Wanita chief), so she has entreated, via a "cupid plan", for Malaysian Chinese to start making more babies because of the apparent reduction in the Malaysian Chinese population.

Malaysian Chinese are mainly Buddhists and ancestor worshippers, Taoists and Christians.

Very few are Muslims. Rosey Ma says there are between 60,000-100,000

Chinese Muslims in the country, about 1 to 1.5 per cent of the total Chinese population. She adds that "though small in number, these Chinese Muslims form a very distinct and unorthodox group in Malaysian society".

"In a nation where ethnicity and religion are closely related, these people are of the ethnicity of one community - the Chinese, while professing the religion of another - the Malays.

"Strangely, while having certain common characteristics with each of these communities, they find themselves marginalised by both."

The founding father and first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the high priest of racial harmony had always, but to no avail, encouraged the Chinese in Malaysia to become Muslims (not *Masuk Melayu*) though he was ably assisted by a born Chinese Haji Ibrahim Ma Tian Ying, former Consul of Chiang Kai Shek's China in Ipoh.

Well, to be fair, they did their best though they achieved little. Before that Chinese conversion was an isolated case.

For the Tunku and good Muslims, Islamic brotherhood transcends race and all other boundaries; it's global.

He worked hard but, alas, only after he lost power, to get the Government to give "all converts to Islam" the same privileges and special position as those enjoyed by the Malays.

Most converts who have assimilated enjoy the privileges in practice, though not in the Constitution.

He stated, and this was reiterated to me by Rosey Ma, that many Chinese who became Muslims forfeited the society of their own people, and sometimes even family.

In some cases they lost their jobs or were ridiculed so much that they were forced to quit their jobs.

The number of Chinese converts is increasing, more than any other racial group. Perhaps as a result of a better understanding of Islam and because assimilation into the majority group has become easier.

Those converts who do not assimilate - and there is no compulsion to do so - find things a bit different from other Chinese because of their new religion. Though Muslim, they are distinct because they wear a Chinese face.

Rosey Ma claims, "They resist re-assimilation into the non-Muslim Chinese majority they once belonged to, as much as they are against (with many exceptions, though) total assimilation into the Malay culture to which they now partly belong, yet which is so distinct from their own.

"Converts face fewer problems now as they are better accepted and treated."

But that is not to say they no longer have problems, but then who hasn't?

The advantage of the Malaysian Chinese Muslims is their ability to act as a bridge between Malays and Chinese which is somehow never stated, much less utilised.

As rightly pointed out to me by Rosey Ma, "Whether they want it or not, to a big extent the Chinese Muslims will go through some kind of acculturation, if not part as simulation, into the Malay culture and way of life.

"This would be true even for other non-Muslim ethnic groups... in the same way as the Malays will take bits and pieces from the cultures of other races. This is what usually happens in a harmonious multi-ethnic society."

Like Rosey Ma, I, too strongly believe Malaysian Chinese Muslims - if they would only strenuously channel their positive efforts - will and must play a crucial role in bringing the two major Malaysian communities closer together, by being part of both, in religion and culture.

Being Muslim does not mean the Chinese must abandon their culture or language (there are more than 60 million Chinese Muslims in China) but, ideally, they should incorporate what is best in Malay culture and customs, for no other reason than that they are Malaysians and living among the majority people who are their co-religionists.

All will benefit, certainly the Chinese Muslims, and even the other Malaysians cannot lose. Indeed they will be enriched through embracing and extolling this new experience.

Islam has always had a powerful influence on the Malays. The British knew it, hence during their long rule they let religious matters and customs remain under Malay jurisdiction.

The key to better Chinese-Malay harmony is for the Malaysian Chinese Muslims to be the harbingers and exemplars of what Malaysia can be.

This is as good as any other time to start the motion. I am confident it will bear fruit sooner than we realise.

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