

**Speaking the Truth in the Midst of  
Divisiveness: The Merdeka Day and Malaysia  
Day Statements of the Christian Federation of  
Malaysia (CFM)**

**分裂中的真相：馬來西亞基督教聯合會的  
獨立日和馬來西亞日聲明**

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[ABSTRACT] The aim of this article is to examine how a Christian ecumenical organization CFM articulates a social critique and offer a theological vision that has ecumenical, intercultural, and implications. The main questions that this essay seeks to address are:

- How and why has the CFM spoken up through public statements for not only the Christian community (it represents) but also the wider Malaysian society?

- In what way, reflection on the CFM public statements offer insights to further develop a public theological vision that may shape the role of the Christian leadership in the public sphere?

**【摘要】** 本文的目的是研究馬來西亞的基督徒合一組織 CFM 如何闡明社會批判，並提供具有普世、跨文化和含義的神學觀點。本文試圖解決的主要問題是：

CFM 如何以及為什麼通過公開聲明不僅為其代表的基督教社區，而且為更廣泛的馬來西亞社會發表言論？

對 CFM 公開聲明的反思，怎樣能提供進一步發展公共神學願景的見解，從而影響基督教領導在公共領域的作用？

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Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace... The Church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things. ~ *The Barmen Declaration 1934*

Our Lord Jesus Christ called us to “love our neighbour as ourselves,” a call to us to renounce a selfish and self-oriented lifestyle. Communities and countries are built up when people band together and live as one. Our faith teaches us that the suppressive use of might is not right. ~ *Christian Federation of Malaysia Merdeka and Malaysia Day Statement 2017*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Let us unite to care deeply for all our communities”, Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 28 August 2017.

## **Introduction**

In John 17:21, Jesus prayed that the disciples may be one just as he and the father are one. The prayer of Jesus for the unity of the church has been a central inspiration for the contemporary ecumenical movement.<sup>2</sup> However, it is important to note that earlier in John 17:14, Jesus clearly states that those whom he has prayed for "are not of the world" and yet are "sent into the world"; and therefore, the answer to the prayer of Christian unity is embodied by the Church in what the Barmen Declaration calls "the as yet unredeemed world".

The Barmen Declaration has been a significant 20th Century document addressing the situation of Christians facing the Nazi ideological state and its subsequent horrors. The declaration has inspired various approaches to public theology enabling Christians to reconsider the subservient attitude of Christians in the wake of unimaginable evil unleashed in contemporary history in their respective contexts. It draws our attention to "the responsibility of both rulers and the ruled" in the excerpt above. However, for a Malaysian one might ask: to what extent Christians in a minority context in Asia would resonate or differ from the Church in the majority Christian west such as Germany.

The Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) is an ecumenical body constituted in 1985 that consists of three national Christian bodies: the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) and the National Evangelical

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<sup>2</sup> See "What Is the World Council of Churches?" - World Council of Churches, July 11, 2016, accessed April 04, 2018, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us>.

Christian Fellowship (NECF).<sup>3</sup> It seeks to represent the Christian voice in a Muslim majority context particularly in a time of Malaysian history. While outsiders and insiders of Malaysia must avoid uncritically claiming its historical trajectory as analogous to the German situation in world war two, there might be lessons to draw from an arguably different context: a situation where citizens are confronted with power dynamics of the state that deeply affect the social cohesion of the nation as well as the religious freedom of the Christian minority. Similar to the authors of the Barmen Declaration, the Malaysian church leadership has attempted to speak out to confront “the suppressive use of might [that] is not right”.

In the article, I will first present in brief the main socio-historical conditions that have constrained as well as inspired the CFM to respond particularly using the Merdeka Day (translated as ‘Independence Day’) and Malaysia Day statements. Second, I will return to the approach of public theology used to analyze and interpret the main themes of the document. I have limited myself to the period of 2010-2017 because of how the statements address the numerous key socio-political developments to illuminate significant themes for further reflection. Third, the statements would be analyzed based on the main themes with relevant commentary and concerns highlighted. This analysis includes reflection on the criticism that the CFM’s public discourse lacks coherence and consistency as well as may actually show an anemic political imagination.<sup>4</sup> Finally, I will close with some remarks for the practice of doing theology inspired by Luther’s notion of ‘tentatio’ that I

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<sup>3</sup> "About Us," Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), accessed April 04, 2018, <http://www.cfmmsia.org/About-CFM>.

<sup>4</sup> Alwyn Lau, "Intimating the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytical Refraction of Christian Theo-Political Activism in Malaysia," *Critical Research on Religion* 2, no. 3 (2014): 284-86.

consider to resonate with the actual contribution of CFM in a divisive and contentious socio-political environment.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Progressive or Regressive Malaysia?**

Malaysia has an international reputation as a modern, multicultural, moderate, and progressive Muslim majority country.<sup>6</sup> After gaining independence from Britain in 1957, later, in 1963, Malaya together with Sabah and Sarawak from the Borneo Island formed the nation of Malaysia. Currently, the Federation of Malaysia is organized around a constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy and independent judiciary.<sup>7</sup> While Islam is the religion of the Federation, other non-Muslim religions can be practiced freely in 'peace and harmony' within some restrictions stated in the Federal Constitution.<sup>8</sup>

By 2011, the ethnically diverse 28 million populated Malaysia had a 60% Muslim-majority and a 40% non-Muslim minority of different religious persuasions. Religious minorities are identified with Buddhism (19.2%), Christianity (9.1%), Hinduism (6.3%), Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions (2.6%), other or unknown (1.5%), and none (0.8%).<sup>9</sup> Malaysians are arguably more religious than secular in their outlook on life similar

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<sup>5</sup> M. Luther, *Luther's Works: Career of the Reformer. Vol. 34* (Fortress Press, 1960), 285-87.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Fajzullin, "Malaysia: "Progressive Style of Islam Is Practical", "<https://en.qantara.de/content/malaysia-progressive-style-of-islam-is-practical>."

<sup>7</sup> However, some scholars have noted the independence and lack of confidence in the Malaysian judiciary since 1988, see B.T. Khoo, "The Malaysian Judiciary since Independence," *Law, Capitalism and Power in Asia: The Rule of Law and Legal Institutions* (1999); M.A. Wu, "The Malaysian Judiciary: Erosion of Confidence," *Australian Journal of Asian Law* 1, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>8</sup> "Religion of the Federation", Article 3, *Federal Constitution of Malaysia* (Malaysia: 2010), 20; "Freedom of Religion", Article 11, *Federal Constitution of Malaysia* (Malaysia: 2010), 25-26.

<sup>9</sup> Statistics.gov.my, "Population Distribution And Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010 (Updated: 05/08/2011)," 2014, accessed July 3, 2014. [http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com\\_content&id=1215](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&id=1215).

to other South East Asian countries. According to the World Values Survey 2006, 96% of Malaysians said religion is important but 35.6% stated trust in people of other religions.<sup>10</sup> While overall religiosity is high in Malaysian society and there is lack of wide spread social conflict, this does not necessarily translate into indicators of proactive interreligious relations. Compared to some other Muslim majority countries for example in the Middle East, Malaysia shows no signs of widespread religious violence; in fact, Overall, the immediate impression has been that Malaysia practices a moderate form of Islam that is perceived to be more tolerant and open.<sup>11</sup>

Observers often attribute the success of this interethnic and interreligious harmony to the Malaysian government's ability to balance various sociopolitical and economic interests of both the Muslim majority and non-Muslim minority citizens; others highlight Malaysian society's ability to celebrate its religious and cultural diversity as it nurtures the national identity of its citizenry.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, 94.9% percent of Malaysians say they are proud of their nationality; therefore, this suggests that while religion is an important identity marker, nationality as a shared identity marker cannot be ignored.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See World Values Survey Wave 5 2005-2009 (Malaysia 2006) and World Values Survey Wave 6 2010 - 2014 (Malaysia 2011), accessed July 1, 2014. <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

<sup>11</sup> See Eduard J. Bomhoff & Mary Gu, 2008. "Malaysia's Muslims – the First World Values Survey," *NUBS Malaysia Campus Research Paper Series 2008-10*, Nottingham University Business School Malaysia Campus; P.G. Riddell, "Islamization, Civil Society and Religious Minorities in Malaysia," *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*, ed. KS Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali (2005): 162-90.

<sup>12</sup> R. Korff, "Globalisation and Communal Identities in the Plural Society of Malaysia," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 22, no. 3.

<sup>13</sup> See World Values Survey Wave 5 2005-2009 (Malaysia 2006) and World Values Survey Wave 6 2010 - 2014 (Malaysia 2011), accessed July 1, 2014. <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

Nonetheless, the picture of a progressive, peaceful, and harmonious Malaysia is confronted by a growing unease on the development of Islam (especially in relation to politics) in Malaysia that have affected the non-Muslim minority. In terms of interreligious relations, there appears to be a regression or an instability in the trends in religious restrictions and social relations between people of different faiths. According to the 2015 Pew Forum Report highlighting trends in religious restrictions and hostilities, Malaysia scored low for the social hostility index and was placed in the category of 'moderate'; while there was an increase from 2007 to 2012, there was a decrease in 2013.<sup>14</sup> Yet Malaysia has also reported a steady increase of government restrictions since 2007; it remains under the category of 'very high', and compared to other countries Malaysia is ranked number 7 just below Saudi Arabia and above Myanmar in 2013.<sup>15</sup> Qualitatively, both non-Muslims and Muslims have expressed their concerns around issues of religious tolerance and its related concern religious freedom rigorously in the public sphere.

In 2007, on behalf of non-Muslims, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism highlighted instances that demonstrates Malaysia's national "unity is threatened by continued infringements of religious freedom".<sup>16</sup> In their note of protest, the council, who represents non-Muslim minority concerns, cites numerous cases to support their claim that

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<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center, Feb. 26, 2015, "Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities", 59.

<sup>15</sup> Pew Research Center, Feb. 26, 2015, "Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities", 9 & 59. Malaysia was ranked below way below Saudi Arabia and was below Myanmar in the 2012 report. For more see: <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

<sup>16</sup> Note of Protest by the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism (MCCBCHST), 2007.

often religious intolerance is due to unclear policies or questions that have arisen in the process of judicial reviews over specific cases. For Christians, from 2007 till 2014 the issue commonly referred to as the ‘Allah’ controversy (in which the government banned the use of the word ‘Allah’ in Christian publications) has also brought to national and international scrutiny questions around religious tolerance in Malaysia specifically for the Christian minority.<sup>17</sup> For the Christian community, this use of the word ‘Allah’ in the Malaysian national language, Malay, was an important fundamental right in terms of the freedom to practice one’s religion within the framework of the federal constitution where Islam is acknowledged as the religion of the federation while other religions can be practiced in peace and harmony in a multi-religious and yet Muslim majority context such as Malaysia.<sup>18</sup>

An important feature of Malaysian Islam is that ethnic Malays are Muslims by birth which is the only ethnoreligious identity stated in the Malaysia federal constitution; the other non-Muslim minorities do not have this identification in the constitution even though the majority of Buddhist would be ethnically Chinese, and the Hindus would be majority Indian. Christians have a mixture of all the ethnic groups particularly in Sabah and Sarawak where the majority of the Christians are from the indigenous tribal communities whom also have a special position in socio-economic affirmative action policies in the nation.<sup>19</sup> The majority and minority dynamics both ethnically

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<sup>17</sup> For a brief historical background, please see Sivin Kit, “Reimagining Solidarity—The “Allah” Controversy, Public Discourse and Interreligious Relations” in *Interactive Pluralism in Asia Religious Life and Public Space (LWF Studies)*, ed. Simone Sinn & Tong Wong-Sze, (Lutheran World Federation, 2016), 161-178.

<sup>18</sup> For a review of the whole controversy, see Sivin Kit, “Reimagining Solidarity – the “Allah” Controversy” in S. Sinn and T.W. Sze, *Interactive Pluralism in Asia: Religious Life and Public Space* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 161-78.

<sup>19</sup> See G.D. Bouma, R. Ling, and D. Pratt, *Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia and the Pacific: National Case Studies* (Springer Netherlands, 2009); D. Sofjan, *Religion, Public Policy and Social Transformation in Southeast Asia : Managing Religious Diversity* (Globethics.net, 2016).



and religiously complicate the extent to which social cohesion can be achieved. Furthermore, in recent years, a series of religious controversies have turned the public spotlight on the debate over political and religious authority and the extent in which citizens should obey or resist governing authorities. The role of religious communities – and for the purpose of this article the Christian community takes on an immediate urgency.

Besides attention to religious freedom and interreligious relations, the wider socio-political development of Malaysia provides a wider framework to understand Christian responses to social progressive or regressive change in the nation. Two general elections provide an insight into the political climate in which the CFM statements were published. The 12th General elections of 2008 marked a significant shift in the political consciousness of Christians in particular and the wider non-Muslim community. On March 8, 2008, Malaysia conducted its 12th General Elections. After the final results were calculated, it was reported that the Barisan Nasional (BN) had lost for the first time two third majorities and lost 4 states and not regaining Kelantan in the last general elections. The results of the elections seem to suggest the sense of discontent among the voters to the ruling government, as the popular vote for the coalition Barisan Nasional led government fell from 63% in 2004 to 51.2%.<sup>20</sup> In the midst of religious controversies even after the 12<sup>th</sup> general election right into the year 2010 onwards, there was also the wider demand for free and fair elections and the push for mature democratic development in the country. There was evidence that religious communities in general were supportive to improve the democratic process with visible participation of clergy – Muslim, Christian and

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<sup>20</sup> A. Rashid Moten, "2004 and 2008 General Elections in Malaysia: Towards a Multicultural, Bi-Party Political System?," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 2 (2009).

Buddhist – in public rallies for free and fair election in 2007 and subsequent rallies.<sup>21</sup> In other words, if previously it was not surprising to observe visible Muslim participation in the democratic process, now non-Muslim religious communities too have been more vocal and visible through either public statements or public participation.<sup>22</sup>

Second, the 13th General Election of Malaysia held on 5 May 2013 was labeled as potentially the ‘dirtiest’ election in the history of Malaysia, although for some it was the best possible chance for a change of government.<sup>23</sup> While the CFM early in 12 July 2012 sent out a pastoral communique to ‘Vote Wisely’, there were a number of unprecedented statements and an open letter that addressed the public and politicians. For example, during the campaign, it was reported that the ‘Allah’ controversy was used as part of an anti-Christian campaign in one constituency; a picture of a campaign board went viral on the internet, in particular Facebook that appeared to incite fear of Christian influence in the country.<sup>24</sup> The CFM issued a statement against “the despicable anti-Christian message on election campaign billboards”. In particular, the CFM understood the message in these billboards as attempts to pit “one community”

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<sup>21</sup> The Official Website for the BERSIH (‘The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections’) is <https://www.bersih.org/> (accessed 3 July 2014). See F.A. Noor, "After the Bersih 2.0 Rally: Impact and Implications," (2011); B. Welsh, "People Power in Malaysia: Bersih Rally and Its Aftermath," (2011).

<sup>22</sup> J. Woo and S.I. Tan, *The Bible and the Ballot: Reflections on Christian Political Engagement in Malaysia Today* (Graceworks, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Ambiga Sreenevasan, “Will elections in Malaysia be free or fair?”, *Al-Jazeera*, May 4, 2013, accessed July 3 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/04/201342982454925143.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Deborah Chong, “Christians protest ‘Allah house’ billboards, want EC action”, *the Malaysian Insider*, May 1 2013, accessed July 3, 2014. <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/allahs-house-billboards-make-christians-see-red-ec-called-to-act>.

(Muslim) against Christians by spreading fear through scare tactics using the issue of "Allah" to breed divisiveness in the electorate.<sup>25</sup>

Third, soon after the 2008 12<sup>th</sup> General Elections, Najib Razak replaced Abdullah Badawi as the Prime Minister of Malaysia and introduced the concept of *1Malaysia* as an inclusive approach to governance to distinguish his own premiership from his predecessors.<sup>26</sup> According to Najib Razak, the 1Malaysia concept was meant to reinforce national unity "irrespective of race or religious belief" in concert with "real improvements on the ground."<sup>27</sup> However, Farish Noor sees hindrances to national unity because "the nature of Malaysia's communal politics also means that anyone who aspires to power has traditionally had to appeal to all the different communities and pander to their private, short-term and at times exclusive demands". In his view, this has resulted in two distinctive lobby groups, one Muslim and the other non-Muslim.<sup>28</sup> Later, Noor's commented on the impasse of interreligious dialogue and points out the "need to look at the expansion of the NGO community and in particular the rise of these new communitarian NGOs."<sup>29</sup> Political Scientist Joseph Chinyong Liow however

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<sup>25</sup> Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) press statement, "CFM Abhors and Protests the Despicable Anti-Christian Message on Election Campaign Billboards", 1 May 2013.

<sup>26</sup> See J. Chin, "Malaysia: The Rise of Najib and 1Malaysia," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2010, no. 1 (2010); M.A.M Sani et al., "Malaysia in Transition: A Comparative Analysis of Asian Values, Islam Hadhari and 1Malaysia," *Journal of Politics and Law* 2, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>27</sup> "1Malaysia Initiatives", *1Malaysia*, accessed July 27, 2014.

<http://www.1malaysia.com.my/en/my-record/1-malaysia/>. See R. Camilleri, "Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: The Journey of Three Prime Ministers," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>28</sup> Farish Noor, "Political concessions in a complex country" the Malaysian Bar Council Website, January 24, 2010, accessed November 19, 2018, [http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/members\\_opinions\\_and\\_comments/political\\_concessions\\_in\\_a\\_complex\\_country\\_farish\\_a\\_noor.html](http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/members_opinions_and_comments/political_concessions_in_a_complex_country_farish_a_noor.html).

<sup>29</sup> Farish A Noor, 29 January 2010 (12:44 p.m.) comment on KShanmuga, "The politics of dialogue" The Nut Graph, January 29, 2010, accessed November 19, 2018, <http://www.thenutgraph.com/the-politics-of-dialogue/>.

maintains the core issue still is Malay-Muslim hegemony, and therefore understands religious controversies such as the ‘Allah’ controversy as one of the effects of this ‘organizing principle’:

... far more at stake than sensitivities or proprietary rights to terminology. Indeed, *the controversy touches on the fundamental organising principle of Malaysian politics and society — Malay ethno-religious primacy — which has begun to erode over the years.* As Najib and his advisors labour over the question of national unity, the “Allah” controversy and the church-burning incidents reveal the obstacles he faces and just how far away the country is from reaching his goal.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, the overall assessment of the government led responses to religious controversies have not injected confidence not only among the non-Muslim minorities but also observed by academics studying Malaysian politics. Furthermore, at the time of writing, the leadership of Prime Minister Najib Razak has been plagued with allegations of financial scandal as well as the tabling and passing of controversial bills and laws that critics label as undemocratic and regressive.<sup>31</sup> Malaysia remains a divided nation.

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph Chinyong Liow, "No God But God," *Foreign Affairs*, February 12, 2010, accessed November 19, 2018.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/malaysia/2010-02-10/no-god-god>.

<sup>31</sup> See Rachel Yeap, "Parliament Passes Redelienation Of Electoral Boundaries With 129-80 Vote" *Pocket News*, March 28, 2018, accessed April 4, 2018.

<https://www.pocketnews.com.my/2018/03/28/parliament-passes-redelienation-of-electoral-boundaries-with-129-80-vote/> and "Dewan Negara Passes Anti-Fake News Bill 2018 | Malay Mail," *Malaysia | Malay Mail*, April 03, 2018, , accessed November 19, 2018,

<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/dewan-negara-passes-anti-fake-news-bill-2018>.

## Public Theology in a Malaysian Key: The Christian Federation of Malaysia and the Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statements

Early in the 1990s, Malaysian theologians have sought to engage in doing theology contextually. For example, Ng Kam Weng and Hwa Yung have raised the importance of a public theological vision or a social vision not only for Malaysia but also Asia.<sup>32</sup> The contributions of S. Batumalai and Albert Walters have addressed Christian-Muslims relations and have sketched some possible ways forward.<sup>33</sup> Overall, there has been a consistent call for Malaysian churches in nation building.<sup>34</sup> These earlier efforts and recent developments resonate with the growing attention in recent years of the field of public theology. Norwegian theologian Kjetil Fretheim suggests that the practice of public theology particularly *in times of crises* provide an insight into particular circumstances and for the purpose of this article I would also add offers a comparative bridge for mutual learning. In his analysis of Kairos Statements of both South Africa and Palestine, he shows how they have churches at critical times articulate a public theology that is not only shaped by

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<sup>32</sup> N.K. Weng, *Doing Responsive Theology in a Developing Nation* (Pastaka SUFES, 1994); *Bridge-Building in a Pluralistic Society: A Christian Contribution* (Pustaka SUFES, 1994); Y. Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas?: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Regnum International, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> A.S. Walters, *We Believe in One God?: Reflections on the Trinity in the Malaysian Context* (ISPCK, 2002); S. Batumalai, *Islamic Resurgence & Islamization in Malaysia: A Malaysian Christian Response : The Re-Awakening of Islam in Relationship to Other Religions in Malaysia* (S. Batumalai, 1996); Albert Sundararaj Walters, "Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations: A Malaysian Christian Perspective," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 18, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>34</sup> An earlier contribution, Goh Keat-Peng, "Church and State in Malaysia," *Transformation* 6, no. 3 (1989). For recent contributions, see Andrew Sia, "Christians & Politics," Features | The Star Online, September 18, 2010, , accessed April 04, 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/features/2010/09/19/christians--politics/> and O Yeoh, "The Political Awakening of Christian Malaysians: An Interview with Sivin Kit. Malaysiakini," <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/205243> , and Hwa Yung, "Christians and Nation Building" <http://www.methodistchurch.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=6&action=view&retrievid=434>.

the context, but arguably may have also shaped the context that informs the interruptive and imaginative dimensions of doing theology in crisis.<sup>35</sup>

The main focus of public theology and the criteria for its effectiveness is mainly to present its arguments in the public sphere for communicative action.<sup>36</sup> However, there are Asian contributions that also raise critical questions to what extent that this approach needs to also go beyond the church.<sup>37</sup> This concern is not new as in earlier liberation theologies, the concern for non-religious specific needs and concerns is also highlighted such as the option of the poor and priority of praxis in doing theology. For purposes of the Malaysian statements, these two theological approaches would be complementary in informing the analysis as well as interpretation of the documents. To some extent, I suggest that a closer look at the CFM statements enables this possibility of not only gaining an insight into Malaysian Christian life and mission, it also offers a bridge for further ecumenical, intercultural and interreligious engagement to enhance our approach in doing public theology.

Within the sociohistorical context described earlier and a theological framework introduced above, we narrow our focus to the CFM which was birthed out of a response to Islamization.<sup>38</sup> The CFM was formally constituted in 1985 with the origins actually in 1979 1<sup>st</sup> National Christian conference in the capital Kuala Lumpur

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<sup>35</sup> K. Fretheim, *Interruption and Imagination: Public Theology in Times of Crisis* (Pickwick Publications, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> S. Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> D.P. Niles, *Is God Christian?: Christian Identity in Public Theology: An Asian Contribution* (Fortress Press, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Chong Eu Choong, "The Christian Response to Islamization" in B. Platzdasch and J. Saravanamuttu, *Religious Diversity in Muslim-Majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 295-99. The term 'Islamization' used here is associated with the normative historical (political) project of infusing Islamic norms and values in culture and political structures.

entitled "Working together for Christ".<sup>39</sup> The leadership of the chairman is rotated for a two-year term from the component bodies: the founding Roman Catholic, Ecumenical, and Evangelical component bodies while the various bodies would have their respective representatives in the CFM council.<sup>40</sup> The aim of the CFM is stated in the following:

- To bring together all Christians who accept the authority of the Holy Bible and who subscribe to the cardinal doctrines of Christianity as set forth in the Apostles' Creed;
- To reinforce and extend, wherever possible, through dialogue and consultation, the areas of common agreement among the various Christian groups in Malaysia;
- To look after the interests of the Christian community as a whole with particular reference to religious freedom and rights as enshrined in the Federal Constitution;
- To represent the Christian community in Malaysia on all matters that affect or are of interest to it;
- To consult and work with the Government and non-governmental (religious and secular) bodies at all administrative levels, on all matters of common interest and concern.<sup>41</sup>

The CFM works closely with an interfaith organization: the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhish, and Taoism (MCCBCHST) in order to address wider issues affecting the non-Muslim minorities in Malaysia.<sup>42</sup> Throughout its journey, the CFM has sought to also balance the

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<sup>39</sup> CFM 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Magazine, 27 April 2015, 18.

<sup>40</sup> CFM 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Magazine, 27 April 2015, 21-24.

<sup>41</sup> "About Us," Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), accessed April 04, 2018, <http://www.cfmmasia.org/About-CFM>.

<sup>42</sup> <https://harmonymalaysia.wordpress.com/>.

reactive tendency of its work – especially in relation to issues around Islamization and religious freedom. It has organized numerous conferences that address issues of national concern affecting all Christians. The themes of the conferences well summarizes the pressing concerns for Christians in Malaysia such as “The Way Forward towards a Caring Society, towards a Just Society, towards a Moral Society (1995), “National Integration and Unity – the Church’s Response (2005), “Navigating through the Storms” (2009) just to name a few. The production of the Merdeka (translated as ‘independence’) and the Malaysia Statements by the Christian Federation of Malaysia has aimed to use the occasion as a means to articulate the concerns and aspirations of Christians to the wider public.

In recent years especially during the period the Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day statements, there appears to be a development from its original stated purpose of religious freedom (which is stated in the last three aims) towards a role that has involved some level of advocacy; additionally, in recent years the CFM has found itself to addressing issues beyond minority concerns only related to Christian interests towards more intentionally identifying with general shared concerns of fellow citizens about the national identity and nation building.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the yearly statements from 2010-2017 examined in this essay is a part that offers a snapshot of how the CFM expresses its pastoral and prophetic voice in the Malaysian context. This is because the audience of the statements unlike a pastoral letter has two audiences: First the Christian, and then the wider society. Another dimension is that it is also addressing the governing authorities while also considering the wider citizenry. Thus, while

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<sup>43</sup> J. Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Platzdasch and Saravanamuttu, *Religious Diversity in Muslim-Majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*.



the statements tend to more general in nature, the specificity of issues also suggests that CFM wishes to make their view heard to those in the corridors of power as well as the citizens on the street. The other important aspect of reading the statements is that they are normative statements which to some extent provide some continuity of theological vision throughout the years. There are other statements that seem to interrupt this flow especially when they are addressing pressing issues. These are more specific and targeted to call for specific response.<sup>44</sup>

One of the challenges for the Malaysian Christian voice has been their inability to be heard. This can be understood in two ways. First, the media conditions for the public sphere in Malaysia is severely restrictive where there is limited freedom of expression in the country. This is in spite of the opening up of the media space since the 1988 Mahathir Cyberjaya initiative Multimedia super corridor.<sup>45</sup> Second, more significantly, there appears to be the turning of a deaf ear towards the complaints of the church leaders in closed door situations. In the context of the 'Allah' Controversy, Bishop Ng Moon Hing speaking on behalf of the CFM commented how they were compelled to bring concerns into the public sphere in order to gain attention.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, to some extent, with media conditions are not necessarily favorable and the governing authorities who send mixed signals, the CFM and other Christian voices nonetheless press on using whatever available means to makes their concerns known through press releases and public statements in online news portals.

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<sup>44</sup> For other statements, declarations, and press statements from 2016-2018, see <http://www.cfmmmsia.org/cfm-statements-2016>

<sup>45</sup> "New Year Message", Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> "New Year Message", Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2012.

## **The Struggle to Speak Pastorally and Prophetically in the Public Sphere**

Overall the CFM Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day statements fluctuate in its pastoral and prophetic tone. This is understandable due to the occasions that have given rise to the statements. However, it may also suggest that the CFM statements point to an internal tension between offering an interruptive critical discourse and a theological imagination that models a distinctive Christian perspective that differs from normal civil society statements within a human rights framework. For example, in 2011, the CFM statement displayed a substantive elaboration of the key social issues and included a call to ‘reject all extremism’.<sup>47</sup> Yet in 2012, the statement appears to be rather tame in comparison with minimal critique; while the focus on the future and on children was noteworthy, there was little called attention to specifics apart from the consistent complaint about ‘strident narrowmindedness’ of people in power.

One explanation of the varied tone of the statements could also be attributed to the fact that the CFM does issue other specific press statements on pressing issues that have arisen in the public sphere; therefore the Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day statements in particular do not necessarily aim for comprehensiveness. In the following, I will highlight the main themes that emerge from these statements to show what are the key priorities of the CFM as well as how they seek to articulate them in the public sphere.

### ***Defending Religious Freedom***

The consistent theme of CFM statements have been in line with its founding aims of safeguarding ‘religious freedom and rights’ of

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<sup>47</sup>“Invest in the Future”, *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2012; “Walk the Talk”, *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2011.

the Christian community. The issue of Religious Freedom is paramount. Consistently, in all its statements, the CFM highlights the need for its own religious practices to be safe guarded. In 2010, it draws attention to the Malaysian Federal Constitution as "the sole foundational document that symbolizes our collective hopes and dreams for our beloved secular Malaysia".<sup>48</sup> Sentences such as this is a direct response to the calls to present Malaysia as an Islamic State (a country with Islamic laws supreme above the current secular status quo).<sup>49</sup> The statement also draws attention to the National Philosophy called the *Rukun Negara* that was birthed out of the ethnic conflicts of May 13, 1969. In 2013, concerns over the Malaysian legal system are mentioned again, and this is where the discourse of Human Rights is also expressed in the same breath next to the uplifting of human dignity. This particular year was important partly because of the closely contested 13<sup>th</sup> general elections of 2013 that was marred by much debate over the role of religion – particularly Islam -- in the public sphere much to the dismay of the church leaders. Therefore, not only the CFM had to principally reassert its position on the Federal Constitution, it also was responding to ongoing pressures to reinterpret the fundamental meaning of the constitutional foundations of the nation.

During the course of debates and controversies over religion during the period of 2010-2017, the Prime Minister's department did set up a National Unity Consultative Council in 2013 soon after the 13<sup>th</sup> general election as "an effort of national reconciliation to reduce racial polarization and building united Malaysia nation", but according to critics it too seemed ineffective in resolving the conflicts or controversies involving Muslim and non-Muslim

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<sup>48</sup> "KPI for Government: Doing Good, Punishing Wrong-Doers, *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> See A. Harding, *The Constitution of Malaysia: A Contextual Analysis* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

concerns as well as wider issues affecting national unity.<sup>50</sup> This ineffectiveness might partially be because in the religious controversies, the federal government or institutions associated with the government are often perceived as the initiator of the controversies; for instance, the Apostasy controversy of Lina Joy was due to the National Registration Department's refusal to remove 'Muslim' from her identity card.<sup>51</sup> Besides this high profile case of Lina Joy that ended with her losing the legal battle, in recent years, there have also been other legal cases testing the impartiality of the Malaysian courts, for example, new cases from the indigenous Christians in Sarawak have drawn attention back to questions of religious freedom and legal jurisdiction.<sup>52</sup>

A reoccurring theme that is further heightened as the statements come to 2017 is the increasing government restrictiveness that the ruling governing authorities have over the Christian communities accentuating an overall climate where there is a Malay-Muslim hegemony that Christians and other non-Muslims are confronted with. This is why the CFM continues to note serious concerns over 'the independence of the judiciary' and the 'continued erosion of the secular character of the Constitution and the Federation'.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See "10 Things to Know about the NUCC's Harmony Bills," Poskod Malaysia, September 15, 2014, accessed November 19, 2018.

<https://poskod.my/cheat-sheets/national-unity-consultative-council/> and Melissa Chi, "Council behind National Harmony Bills Clueless about Planned New Law", Malay Mail, August 10, 2015, accessed April 4, 2018.

<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/council-behind-national-harmony-bills-clueless-about-planned-new-law>.

<sup>51</sup> T. Kortteinen, "Islamic Resurgence and the Ethnicization of the Malaysian State: The Case of Lina Joy," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 23, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>52</sup> "Sarawak Christian Group Disappointed with Apostasy Ruling," Free Malaysia Today, March 05, 2018, accessed April 4, 2018.

<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/03/05/sarawak-christian-group-disappointed-with-apostasy-ruling/>.

<sup>53</sup> "Let us Unite to Care Deeply for all our communities", *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2017.

### ***Addressing Harmful Political, Legal, Economic and Social Developments***

Although, one is tempted to be dismissive of the political use (or abuse) of religion in the public sphere as irrational, the issue of political actors and the political atmosphere of Malaysia is concern that the CFM has increasingly confronted. In the course of rebuking incendiary speech and behavior by politicians, the Malaysian Christian leadership – that have maintained that they are non-partisan – have been accused on partisanship aligning itself with the political opposition.<sup>54</sup> While offering the positive pastoral call to nation building is the constant feature of the Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day statements, increasingly the CFM statements have become more explicit in naming the perceived negative and harmful political climate of Malaysia. Earlier attention on hate speech and religious extremism in 2010 and 2012 were more general in nature.<sup>55</sup> However, there have also been stronger remarks on 'evil people' that seek damage and destroy pass unity of the nation; these actors and to some extent the governing authorities are alluded to as not using their positions of influence to speak against hate speech. In 2013, the CFM called peace-loving Malaysians "to reject those who are racists and religious chauvinists in both their speech and actions ... [and] to actively resist all who use race and religion to drum up fear and hatred against others for political mileage and advantage."<sup>56</sup> In the

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<sup>54</sup> See "Academic Challenges Bishop's Claim Church Is Non-partisan," Free Malaysia Today, September 21, 2017, accessed April 4, 2018, <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/09/21/academic-challenges-bishops-claim-church-is-non-partisan> and "CFM: Church Will Always Remain Non-partisan | Malay Mail," Malaysia | Malay Mail, December 25, 2017, accessed April 4, 2018, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/cfm-church-will-always-remain-apolitical>.

<sup>55</sup> *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2010 and *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> "A Nation for All", *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian

2014 statement that was clearly emphasizing the positive theme of hope, it expressed continual frustration of the downhill spiral of interfaith and interethnic harmonious relations. The severe language below sheds light on the deep concern from the Christian leadership:

We are also witnessing an escalation in ethnic and religious extremism, where *unchecked sectarian forces of hatred and bigotry*, often fuelled by misinformation and misinterpretation, lies and inflammatory speeches, are ripping apart the social fabric of our nation that had been built on the principles of moderation and multi-culturalism. We believe that all Malaysians truly have cause for concern.<sup>57</sup>

In 2016, the CFM named explicitly a range of actions in the public sphere by the government authorities and also politicians associated with the ruling coalition that have disrupted the peaceful coexistence between citizens of different ethnicities and religions:

Further deterioration of racial polarization through *deliberate actions of segregation, hateful speeches and intimidation calls*; discriminative application of anti-sedition and anti-hate speech laws; wrongful usage of investigations where the complainants are intimidated instead, and freedom of travel is curtailed; anti-corruption laws are being selectively applied; and a new potentially repressive law has come into force.<sup>58</sup>

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Federation of Malaysia, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> "We Must Continue to Hope", *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2014 [emphasis added].

<sup>58</sup> "Celebrating Unity through our Diversity", *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2016. [emphasis added]

Additionally, the CFM statements raise the awareness of economic concerns that overlaps with the alarming political climate and the legal regression. In 2010, although the CFM welcomed "the policy of inclusive development" that included the indigenous people of both west and east Malaysia as well as "the urban poor, the marginalized, and the powerless", the statement also noted "evil people in this country that do not seek the common good and well-being of all Malaysians"; furthermore, the statement called the government to "frustrate the efforts of all such groups" particularly even if they are "elements within the administration of the ruling coalition itself."<sup>59</sup> Later statements in 2016 highlighted the need for "meaningful sharing [and] partnership towards sustainable economic, social, cultural and political growth and development ..."<sup>60</sup> These statements are critical because of the affirmative action policies in the Malaysian context but also further accentuated by the economic growth of Malaysia since the 1980s. The weakening of the democratic institutions as well as later questionable economic policies in the past as well as new policies that emerged in 2016.<sup>61</sup>

As Muslims and non-Muslims voice their hopes for religious harmony in the public sphere; they often face hindrances to realize these ideals highlighted above; and thus resulting in some cases their decision to resort to the courts for resolutions. Critics or skeptics argue that even with the formation of the interreligious consultative body such as MCCBCHST, the efforts towards interreligious harmony with Muslims have been uphill due to the lack of Muslim

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<sup>59</sup> *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2016.

<sup>61</sup> "A Prayer for Truth and Justice", *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2015; *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2016; *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2017.

participation or in some cases outright opposition.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, in 2017, the abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh has raised a deep cause for concern among Malaysians.<sup>63</sup> Religious leaders rightly have expressed concern over the safety and security of religious communities;<sup>64</sup> there are also key Muslim voices that have also expressed their concern.<sup>65</sup> The institutions including the police have caused the Christian leadership to tread carefully in raising awareness on the overall security of the nation. Therefore, the overall developments in various spheres have not been encouraging for the maintenance of the peace and harmony among the religiously diverse population.

### *Confronting the Abuse of Power*

An implied allusion to abuse and misuse of political power was already present even in the statements of 2010 right through to 2014. Furthermore, other supplementary statements also reinforce the frustration of the CFM in their engagement with the government in closed doors. However, for the Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statements, in 2015, the strongest statement issued by the CFM was where the Prime Minister was highlighted in the wake of alleged financial impropriety as well as the unsettled political climate with enforcement agencies that appear to prey on the weak, and

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<sup>62</sup> K Shanmuga, "The Politics of Dialogue" The Nut Graph, accessed April 04, 2018, <http://www.thenutgraph.com/the-politics-of-dialogue/>.

<sup>63</sup> "Malaysia: More Questions than Answers in Kidnapping of Pastor Raymond Koh." Asian Correspondent. March 06, 2017. Accessed April 04, 2018. <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2017/03/malaysia-questions-answers-kidnapping-pastor-raymond-koh/#DfQXZqv5zA78jM20.99>.

<sup>64</sup> Christian Federation of Malaysia Statement "People of faith should be free from threats of violence and intimidation", 17 February 2017.

<sup>65</sup> "Mujahid Sanggup Berunding Dengan Penculik Pastor Koh." Free Malaysia Today. March 06, 2017, accessed April 04, 2018. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/2017/03/06/mujahid-sanggup-berunding-dengan-penculik-pastor-raymond/>.



economically marginalized.<sup>66</sup> The opening paragraph reads as follows:

As we approach Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day this year, our nation finds itself in the midst of a political maelstrom the likes of which has never been seen before in this country. *An embattled Prime Minister seeks to maintain his hold on power in the face of serious allegations of corruption and financial impropriety.* Ministers and senior civil servants are sacked or transferred. One enforcement agency confronts another. Each new day brings with it fresh revelations, rumours and anecdotes, challenging credibility and credulity. *Our nation is in crisis.*<sup>67</sup>

The above statement clearly shows that CFM is no longer merely speaking on behalf of the Christian community and interests but now has ventured to speak openly, explicitly, and courageously about what has been named as "The world's biggest financial scandal".<sup>68</sup> The question of poor governance's has also been an important theme where policies enacted have not been beneficial to the Orang Asli (indigenous people in Malaysia), but now a financial scandal that has drawn international attention further raises alarm on the total state of governance in Malaysia.<sup>69</sup> In the 2017 Statement, the CFM highlights the following:

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<sup>66</sup> *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2015 [emphasis added].

<sup>68</sup> See, "Financial Times Malaysia: The 1MDB Money Trail," Financial Times, accessed April 04, 2018.

<https://www.ft.com/content/0981b2c8-cfe3-11e5-92a1-c5e23ef99c77>; Shamim Adam and Laurence Arnold, "A Guide to the Worldwide Probes of Malaysia's 1MDB Fund," Bloomberg.com, March 07, 2018, accessed April 04, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-07/malaysia-s-1mdb-fund-spawns-worldwide-probes-quicktake>.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

... the political pitting of one religion against another (making the Christian community the proverbial bogeyman), the accountability of political leaders, the perceived selective prosecution of incidences of corruption, the government's withdrawal of a provision banning the unilateral conversion of children, the general elections which are to take place by next year or the escalating financial burden of the average Malaysian especially of those from the lower income bracket whose basic livelihood has been adversely impacted.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, in the context of speaking on Jesus' call to "love our neighbor as ourselves", when the CFM states "our faith teaches us that the suppressive use of might is not right" it has shifted from a pastoral tone to a prophetic one where arguably the Christian leadership now is articulating a public discourse that is both interruptive of disruptive abuse of power that have created conditions that are unfavorable for decent living as well as neighborly coexistence.<sup>71</sup>

#### ***Struggle between Resistance and Reconciliation***

Traditionally, during election seasons, the main call to action of the CFM has been through the 'vote wisely' campaign in concert with the Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statements encouraging Christian participation in the democratic process. However, critics have questioned the lack of specificity in the call to action. Alwyn Lau, for example, claims that the CFM statements are incoherent and displays an anemic political imagination that arguably weakens a potential for greater mobilization of the Christian community. He faults the CFM for not showing consistency by publicly calling the

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<sup>70</sup> *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> *Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statement*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2017.

Christian minority to exercise their vote against the ruling coalition after the CFM public criticisms of the ruling government. Yet other Christian voices have alluded to the CFM overall approach in the public sphere may be too confrontational.<sup>72</sup> A number of Muslim critics have accused the church of being partisan even for the "Vote Wisely" campaigns.<sup>73</sup> There have been even accusations of those self-identified as evangelicals that they are part of Christian Zionism and dominion theology movements (speculatively funded or influenced by Christians from the United States).<sup>74</sup> Lau rightly shows that the CFM approach is not necessarily revolutionary; however, he appears to reduce his assessment of the CFM on the lack of an explicit 'command' to its members to vote against the ruling coalition. Perhaps, he had not fully taken into account the internal and external conditions that may constrain the CFM that does not easily enable it to convey a revolutionary rhetoric in public.<sup>75</sup> Critical interventions of Christians in Malaysia may include other forms of expression that are not necessarily explicitly political such as voting (albeit it is very important); yet other more creative modes of *participation* and even *resistance* have been proposed in the area of interreligious relations and civic engagement may offer a more holistic perspective.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> For example, see Lee Min Choon, *Return to the Golden Land* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Self-published, 2017).

<sup>73</sup> "Academic Challenges Bishop's Claim Church Is Non-partisan," Free Malaysia Today, September 21, 2017, accessed November 11, 2018. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/09/21/academic-challenges-bishops-claim-church-is-non-partisan/>.

<sup>74</sup> See Iain Buchanan, *Sang Nila Utama And The Lion Of Judah*, 2nd ed., (Citizens International, 2015) that suggest an overreaching generalized conclusion in terms of causal relations between strands of US Christianity and Malaysian Christianity.

<sup>75</sup> Lau, "Intimating the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytical Refraction of Christian Theo-Political Activism in Malaysia."

<sup>76</sup> Sivin Kit, "Christian Participation and Creative Resistance: Reflecting on Luther's Two-Fold Governance in Muslim-Majority Malaysia," *Dialog* 56, no. 3 (2017).

In his brief reflective snapshot of Christianity in Malaysia for 1989-2013, Roxborough highlights *prayer* and *belonging* as key themes illuminating how the spiritual resources of the Christian community have been brought to bear to face the challenges Christians face. Where the challenges would arise has been the tension between prayer and action.<sup>77</sup> The theme of belonging is rightly put since in recent years particularly after the 12<sup>th</sup> general elections in 2008 and the 13<sup>th</sup> general elections in 2013, The church have positioned itself clearly as a contributor to nation building which is foundational to the CFM Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day statements. And the formation of the national identity is important to the churches' self-identity. This is clear from its commitment to the use of the national language Bahasa Malaysia (or Melayu) in its liturgy, Christian education, and theological education.<sup>78</sup> The expressions of prayer and belonging of the Christian community through the CFM statements can be understood as part of longer term efforts that integrate prayer, a sense of belonging, and the call to action.

Admittedly, one may question the extent that the Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day statements lack prophetic rigor and often stops short of a definite courageous call towards specific actions that would demand greater sacrifice on the Christian minority. Nonetheless, the nature of public theology in Malaysia may require further discernment as to what extent it is the role of an organization like CFM who's stated aims originally did not involve a specific focus on advocacy to expand its terms of reference more explicitly.

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<sup>77</sup> J. Roxborough, *A History of Christianity in Malaysia* (Genesis Books, 2014).

<sup>78</sup> See Kuching Declaration, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2008. Besides Sabah Theological Seminary that uses the national language Bahasa Malaysia and various Bible colleges in East Malaysia, the Malaysia Theological Seminary in West Malaysia has also launched its Bahasa Malaysia program for Theological education by Extension in 2013, and its Bachelor of theology programme in 2018.

The limitation of CFM's public discourse may reflect an ongoing tension to negotiate how a public theology may be articulate in concert with the call to a social ethics that would not only provide pastoral guidance for the Christian community but also offer a model of prophetic witness that would energize the Christian minority in politically, culturally, and religiously volatile environment. Furthermore, Peter Rowan rightly points out that there is a gap between what is professed by Malaysian Christians with what is actually practiced when it comes to Christian engagement in society.<sup>79</sup> This appears to be an immediate hindrance that the CFM aims to overcome partially through the Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statements in concert with its other specific statements responding to various issues. In other words, there may still be internal divisions that require further attention before the Christian community can truly become *agents of reconciliation* in a society that is under constant pressure of political actors to divide and rule over the citizenry.

#### ***Attending to the Gap between Public Articulation and Actual Engagement***

It is important to note that the public statements of the CFM represent a visible articulation of positions and concerns informed by much ongoing activity and specific actions that does not necessary receive much media and public attention. The CFM acts primarily as a consultative body where specific programmes and collective action is carried out by its component bodies: The Roman Catholic Church, the Council of Churches of Malaysia, and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship. Nonetheless, there are actual engagements of CFM that include deliberations with federal government agencies on

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<sup>79</sup> See P. Rowan, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker: The Malaysian Church as an Agent of Reconciliation in a Multicultural Society* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013).

matters related to policy matters such as resolving visa approvals for foreign-language Christian workers to serve in churches with foreign congregations, clarifications on government-service tax with officials due to its possible impact on church institutions, providing input for the religion module for the National service.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, The CFM also works with the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism especially when issues arise affecting the religious freedom and interreligious harmony of the nation cannot be addressed only within a narrow Christian perspective.<sup>81</sup>

Such deliberations and interventions inform the public statements for the Merdeka and Malaysia Day Statements highlighted in this article and also other specific issue-based statements usually in protest of unjust actions or policies by the government. For example, in 2014, when copies of the Malay Language Bible was seized by state Islamic religious department officers, besides voicing their protest, the CFM and relevant bodies such as the Bible Society of Malaysia actively engaged various parties from politicians to the government bureaucracy which resulted in the successful release of the Bibles.<sup>82</sup> However, not all interventions are related to short-term controversies. There have been less confrontational ongoing activities where longer-term solutions

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with Elder Tan Kong Beng, Executive Secretary of the Christian Federation of Malaysia, 7 November 2018.

<sup>81</sup> Chong Eu Choong, "The Christian Response to State-led Islamization in Malaysia" in Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu, *Religious Diversity in Muslim-majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 299-300.

<sup>82</sup> See "Selangor trying to 'wash its hands' over seized Bibles issue, says CFM" The Star Online, October 18, 2015, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/04/04/cfm-says-sgor-wash-hand-bible-issue/> and Akil Yunus, "Jais Returns Seized Bibles," The Star Online, October 14, 2015, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/11/14/bibles-returned-to-christian-community-azmin-ali-jais/>.

have the potential to develop. For example, in the context of a key government initiative in 2016 to address the growing unease regarding interreligious relations, both Rev Dr Hermen Shastri, the General Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia took on the role of the deputy chairman and Elder Tan Kong Beng, the executive secretary of the CFM also served as a committee member of the Committee to Promote Understanding and Harmony among Religious Adherents which has conducted monthly or bi-monthly meetings for religious leaders from both Muslim and non-Muslim communities to be able to bring up their concerns before each other such as unilateral conversions and the use of religious terminology that affect religious harmony.<sup>83</sup> Although the progress has been slow because the complexities of the Malaysian scenario which still requires the involvement of Muslim authorities such as Muftis from various states, the establishment of such a committee nonetheless is still considered as a long awaited and overdue achievement for Malaysia to not neglect or even ignore non-Muslim voices. At the very least, non-Muslims have a platform where they "sit at the table" with their Muslim counterparts in a respectful manner to address any grievances or complaints from respective religious communities.<sup>84</sup>

Overall, the primary function that CFM remains as an important platform for consultation among the representatives of the Christian component bodies, but admittedly initiative to conduct specific

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<sup>83</sup> Interview Rev Dr Hermen Shastri, General Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia, 2 November 2018. See also, Abas, Azura. "Najib: Inter-religious Committees Necessary towards Achieving Harmony and Peace." *Nst.com.my*. February 24, 2016, accessed November 11, 2018. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/02/129307/najib-inter-religious-committees-necessary-towards-achieving-harmony-and-peace> and "Putrajaya Unveils 32 New Members of Religious Harmony Panel." *The Edge Markets*. February 24, 2016, accessed November 11, 2018. <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/putrajaya-unveils-32-new-members-religious-harmony-panel>.

<sup>84</sup> Interview Rev Dr Hermen Shastri. General Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia, 2 November 2018.

programmes entrusted to be carried out through the respective component bodies has shown uneven results due to differing emphasis of each component body.<sup>85</sup> Christian ecumenism and public engagement in Malaysia continues to be driven thus far often in reaction with external pressures and controversies; the question remains to what extent there is a stronger commitment and motivation in ecumenical relations that is built on theological convictions beyond immediate practical considerations?<sup>86</sup> Thus, while the CFM has been faithful to its founding principles and does not operate from an armchair distance to the actual needs of grass-root Christians, there remains a distance between the public articulation of the CFM positions with grass-root initiated solutions (although new efforts are emerging in the last 10 years).<sup>87</sup> The achievements of the CFM may be rightly viewed as able to bring Christians to face common obstacles, the public statements is one significant way to articulate a common Christian voice and present a call action. But there still appears to be insufficient collective will and commitment from church leaders towards forging a more intentional, theologically robust, and the socially pro-active posture in support of a more impactful Christian witness in a multi-religious context.<sup>88</sup> As CFM speaks out in the Malaysian public sphere often characterized by divisiveness, it is also challenged to reflect back on the forces and inadequacies that hinder the Malaysian Christian community from greater unity of action and reflection in expressing their common Christian witness in a multi-religious Muslim majority context.

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Elder Tan Kong Beng, Executive Secretary of the Christian Federation of Malaysia, 7 November 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Interview Rev Dr Hermen Shastri, General Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia, 2 November 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Elder Tan Kong Beng, Executive Secretary of the Christian Federation of Malaysia, 7 November 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Interview Rev Dr Hermen Shastri, General Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia, 2 November 2018.



## Concluding Remarks

This article has merely sketched and provided an overview of the main trajectory that CFM has traveled in through an examination of its yearly public statements that is aligned to Malaysians commemoration of independence and its formation – both which are central to the articulation of the meaning of being a Malaysian. The public discourse of the CFM demonstrates a voice that conveys both a pastoral and a prophetic tone that has sought to defend religious freedom, address harmful socio-political, legal, and even economic developments, and to some extent confronted the abuse of power by governing authorities under severely restrictive conditions. However, as the CFM articulates the concerns of the Malaysian Christian leadership within a backdrop of contestant socio-political and religious controversy, the appearance of incoherence and caution draws attention to acknowledge the inner tensions and outer limitations that may constrain the production of public statements. Nonetheless, arising from a Christian minority in a Muslim-majority context, the CFM Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day statements are not the last word on any given issue but rather attempts at offering initial words of public theologizing articulating concerns affecting Christians and the wider Malaysian society to be vocalized in the public sphere. There is still more room to improve on closing the gap between the public articulation of the Christian voice with actual engagement on the ground with various political and social actors.

Arguably, it may be too early to claim the extent that the CFM public discourse is a reflection of 'political anemia' of Malaysian Christians.<sup>89</sup> Neither can we claim that the statements have or can become an inspirational call towards concerted action, nor are the

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<sup>89</sup> Lau, "Intimating the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytical Refraction of Christian Theo-Political Activism in Malaysia," 284.

statements in the same theological league as the Barmen Declaration. Rather, I would offer a more modest claim that the CFM Statements at the very least offer us a glimpse of what doing theology in the middle of testing and trial looks like. Such public theologizing is not from the armchair contemplative or therapeutic posture but rather it is in the midst of ongoing experience of affliction (or even attacks). The CFM statements are products of those who continually engaged in immersing oneself in the practice of the third rule of Luther's way of doing theology after *Oratio* (prayer) and *Meditatio* (meditation):

there is the *tentatio*, testing (*Anfechtung*). This is the touchstone. It teaches you not only to know and understand but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's word is: it is wisdom supreme.<sup>90</sup>

And this is how the Malaysian ecumenical community has demonstrated doing theology in a minority context. Perhaps, the experience of gaining wisdom through such public theologizing would also offer a bridge to representatives and leaders in the Muslim-majority to pursue a national solidarity not bound by the respective self-interests of each community. Above all, as Malaysian Christians gain courage to publicly speaking the truth in the midst of divisiveness they might also has to self-critically address forces of divisiveness within its own community that hinders the Christian witness in Malaysia. In the near future, as an answer to the prayer of Jesus in John 17, Malaysian Christianity would need to further intensify its development of a truly transformative theological vision and witness that transcends ethnoreligious centric interests that addresses its own pressing concerns but is also relevant to other Asian contexts and beyond.

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<sup>90</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works: Career of the Reformer*. Vol. 34, 286-87.

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