

Book Reviews

Preaching to the Non-Muslim Chinese in Malaysia, by Osman Chuah Abdullah. Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2002 (Reprinted in 2005), iv+103 pages (ISBN: 983-9727-72-9).

It is common knowledge that Malaysian Chinese are resistant to conversion to Islam. There are currently more than 57,000 Chinese Muslims in the country. Few studies have hitherto been completed on this group of Chinese who seem to have been marginalized by the mainstream Chinese community as well as the Muslim community.

The present publication on the Chinese Muslim by Osman Chuah Abdullah is one of the few on the subject. The study is unique in targeting Muslim readers in an attempt to enlighten them on how to preach to the Chinese. The objectives of the study are clearly spelt out in the introduction. These include attempts to find out the various barriers and difficulties in communicating the message of Islam to the non-Muslim Chinese in Malaysia and to find out the historical, political, economic and cultural differences between non-Muslim Chinese and the Islamic ways of life. The analysis delves into Chinese-Muslim and Chinese-Malay relationships, the methods of preaching to the Chinese and their perceptions of Islam, and the meaning of Islam from the *Qur'an* and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad. The study also examines the fear of the Chinese and Malays in their relationships as minority and majority groups.

From the stated objectives, the readers may reasonably expect a rich account and analysis of why Malaysian Chinese resist conversion to Islam and how the Muslims may address these issues. However, the author instead includes two lengthy chapters on the theological background of *da'wah* and the duties of the Muslims. These chapters take up half the 103-page book, presented in a style that is rather *ulama*-like and commonly encountered in most *da'wah* books that are available local bookshops. Another two chapters covering 34 pages are devoted to the discussion of issues identified in the objectives. Much of the details in these chapters are extracted from the author's doctoral thesis which published earlier by the same publisher. One of the chapters on traces the troubled Chinese-Malay relations to the "divide and rule" policy of the British as the main stumbling block of Chinese conversion to Islam. As Islam is perceived as a Malay religion, the Chinese aversion to conversion is an expression of the fear of being assimilated by the Malay community. On the other hand, the Malays too are not enthusiastic to convert the Chinese for fear that the latter may claim to be Malays. But to be a Malay, one has to satisfy the legal requirements, as specified in the constitution, that one speaks the Malay

language, is a Muslim, and practises Malay custom. Theoretically at least it is possible for one to qualify as a Malay as long as these three conditions are met. One would therefore be entitled to the privileged status legally enjoyed by and conferred upon the Malays in the country. The short chapter that follows presents an overview of the Chinese attitude towards Islam and Chinese Muslims. It is found that the Chinese harbour many misconceptions about Islam and Muslims and these have constituted stiff barriers to the acceptance of Islam. It is also conceded that some of these misconceptions are the creation of Malay Muslims. Overall, there seems to be a genuine lack of communication between the two communities.

Several other issues that deter the Chinese from converting to Islam are briefly mentioned in the short conclusion. Five major factors of deterrence are stated and these include the inability of the Chinese to grasp the concept of a universal religion and a creator God; their preference for polytheism and ancestor worship; their habit of eating pork; their reluctance to accept a religion which is perceived as an inferior Malay religion; and their wish for a pluralistic society and resistance to cultural assimilation.

To the average non-Muslim reader, these deterrents seem to be unconvincing. Christians who are also followers of a monotheistic universal religion are evidently more effective in preaching to and converting the Chinese in Malaysia. Buddhism does not encounter serious difficulties in convincing many Chinese to abstain from meat altogether and not just pork. The points about perception and assimilation are basically questions of ethnic relations and have little to do with religion.

The conclusion also puts forward six suggestions to address these issues, namely:

1. Organizing joint Muslim and non-Muslim activities such as cross-country run and walkathon.
2. The holding of interfaith dialogues.
3. The need for Muslims to learn the language, culture, customs and norm of other ethnic communities.
4. The teaching of a course on inter-ethnic relations in local universities and schools and Islamic studies to non-Muslim students.
5. Extending invitations to non-Muslim organizations and their representatives to the national *hijarah* or Muslim transformation programme.
6. The importance for Muslims to be successful socially and economically.

More communication and dialogues will certainly be welcomed by the Chinese community. The popularity of various inter-faith dialogues in recent year bears witness to that. Point 3 is what one would reasonably expect a book with such title to address. The readers, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, would expect the writer to examine such cultural differences and how the Muslims can help to resolve disagreements. Chinese Christians, for example, have reflected for many decades on issues such as ancestor worship and filial piety, reconciling Christian theology with Chinese culture and custom. The Buddhists too have to reconcile such issues, although Buddhism has a longer history in China and much has already been done

earlier. As Islam enters China much earlier than Christianity, more should have been done to reconcile Chinese-Muslim differences. Islam is a total way of life, as pointed out by the author, and encroaches on every aspect of the believer's life. A major concern of the average Chinese, after conversion to Islam, is how much "Chineseness" is left (Ma, 2011).

There is an absence of in-depth discussion on why Malaysian Chinese against conversion to Islam. This aversion is attributed to issues that are more complex than what is presented in the book, though the lack of understanding between the Chinese and Malays is one of them. Despite the fact that Islam entered China much earlier than Malaysia, it has nevertheless failed to become a dominant religion in China. Few among the Han Chinese have converted to Islam and most of the Muslims in China are hereditary Muslims. This fact alone raises the need for deeper social and cultural analyses to resolve the conflicts between Chinese and Muslim cultures. On this subject, Rosey Wang Ma's works is enlightening (Ma, 2011: 89-108). Chuah merely touches on the government's various policies that may have led to the Chinese resistance to Islamic conversion. Suggestions to teach Islamic studies to non-Muslims in schools will be counter-productive as it would evoke strong protests. Likewise, any move to make Muslims study other religions would be equally ineffective. It is also unconstitutional to propagate any other religion to Muslims. Blaming the British "divide and rule" policy is a convenient excuse rather than an explanation on why the Chinese keep away from Islam. Moreover, after 56 years of independence, Malaysians below 56 years of age would not have any clue as to what this British policy was about. In short the present situation is in fact the product of our own policies.

Finally, the book would certainly benefit from professional editing before being sent to the printer. One may lament the failure of the publisher to fulfill its duty. Better still, setting aside the parts that are not directly related to the theme of the study, this book should more relevantly be published as an article in a suitable journal.

Reference

MA, Rosey Wang 2011. The Chinese Muslims. In *Malaysian Chinese: An Inclusive Society*, edited by Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies, Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies.

SEE Hoon Peow
SEGi University
Malaysia