

# THE RECOGNITION OF ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN COUNSELING IN MALAYSIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Recently, in Malaysia, there are great attempts to insert religious values in counseling practices. Nevertheless, the Malaysian Counselor Act did not clearly stated the recognition status of religious counseling. This study has been designed to investigate the meaning and the degree of recognition of Islamic and Christian Counselling in Malaysia. This qualitative research has employed qualitative method. The data was collected from semi structured interviews of 32 informants. The result shows that both Islamic and Christian counseling are recognized by the community but not recognize by the Malaysian government.*

**Keywords:** Recognition, religious counselling, Islamic counselling, Christian counseling, Malaysia, qualitative

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, in Malaysia, there are great attempts to insert religious values in counseling practices, and the counselors have been much more aware to the religious aspects in the philosophy, moral values and code of ethics of counseling [1]. Nevertheless, the Malaysian Counselor Act [2] did not clearly stated the recognition status of religious counseling. Furthermore, there is no study on the Malaysians' response generally and the counselors' response specifically towards the recognition of religious counseling generally or Islamic or Christian counseling specifically.

The recognition matter is raised in this research because even though the spiritual counselling has become increasingly recognized in some countries such as the United States of America (USA) [3], secular counseling has been the type of counseling recognized by the state's law [4]. In other words, religious counseling is not the state's affair but it is the religious bodies' business [5]. That is an example of the condition of religious counseling in a secular country. Hence, this study is projected to investigate the same issue, but in Malaysia.

Discussing the recognition of Christian counseling generally, there are reports that demonstrate the deceleration of religious counseling together with several proves on religion influences in counseling, even during the post-secularism period. In term of overall growth of pastoral counseling in Britain, Foskett and Lynch [6] reported that the status of pastoral counseling within the wider British counseling movement in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century was indistinct due to several factors such as the declination of British society's support to religious institutions and their preference to non-church-based counselor, the fragmentation of the pastoral counseling around different organizations due to the absence of single leading organization, the deficiency of exclusive interpretation of particular psychological models of pastoral counseling and the nonexistence of sustained academic interest in British pastoral counseling. On the contrary, Bondi [7] reported that counseling and psychotherapy in the post-Durkheimian Scotland, are deeply instilled with Christian influences. Ting [8] also reported that even in the socialist country like China, the need for pastoral psychology in both urban and rural is growing. Furthermore, even in a Czech atheistic context, Raus [9] reported that there are demand in Christian, value-based marital seminars and counseling from the secular community. Additionally, Dr. Bob Kelleman,

Chair of the Biblical Counseling and Discipleship Department at Crossroads Bible College in Indianapolis, declared in his blog [10] that during his consultation, he found that churches were inclined to two extreme stance, retreat in paranoia because of the fear of lawsuits or ignore legal issues and place at risk their church.

In USA, The Pastoral Counseling Center (2011) website [11] stated that this law hold strict ethical standards that decree an individual's right to be free from religious influence, and therefore, state licensed counselors must not advocate their personal religious beliefs. The National Christian Counselors Association (NCCA) website [12] reported that the state licensed professional counselor is forbidden to pray, read or refer to the Holy Scriptures, counsel against homosexuality and abortion. Initiating such counsel would be considered unethical by the state. Nevertheless, the state and federal governments of USA also have jurisdictional boundaries not to interfere the authority of churches and its clergy to operate Christian counseling. From these two statements, it is understood that there were some legal issues in the practice of Pastoral Counseling in USA,

In term of Islamic counseling, most of the literatures did not stressed directly to the recognition aspects. Salleh [13], when describing the development of counseling in Saudi Arabia, stressed that Islam is the foundation for counseling in an Islamic country. The same goes to Farah [14] in his article on counseling in Jordan, accentuated that Islamic belief should guide the counseling services and incorporated in its strategies. In Singapore, a study on the perception of the counseling process [15], shows that Malay clients and counselors agreed that their worldview about family and social relationships was highly influenced by religious beliefs and teachings from the Quran. Later, Ow & Osman [16] pointed out the importance of Singaporean counselors to have the understanding toward the cultural logic of the Malay client from both the Islamic and traditional points of view. A study on theological aspect in psychotherapy had been done by Kari O'grady and P. Scott Richards [17] that gave some clue regarding the recognition issue of religious elements employed in psychotherapy, which was stated in one of the results that suggested that the theistic conceptions of God have not yet been adequately considered in psychological theory and research about God image. Similarly, in Malaysia, Jaladin [18] suggested that Islamic counseling is considered as a part of multicultural approach in counseling.

Furthermore, some Malaysian mental-health professionals, when describing the meaning of well-being [19], revealed their Muslim clients' perceptions of anxiety and affirmed their belief that unfaithful acts, ingratitude towards God, non-forgiven sin are the causes of anxiety. Believing in the existence of God and praying are considered by them as ways of liberation from anxiety. The researcher has also discovered some therapists' practice of Islamic perspective counseling and suggested the need to develop an Islamic or Malaysian therapeutic theory. Hamjah and Mat Akhir [20] have examined the attitude of nine Malaysian Muslim counselors in practicing Islamic counseling, and discovered that all of the respondents admitted that they incorporated the Islamic creed in their counseling

On the other hand, in Iran, Yadegarfarid & Bahramabadian [21] rejected the view of incorporating Islamic law (*Shari'a*) in counseling related to ethical dilemmas such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). For Iranian psychologists and counselors with LGBT clients and the related ethical dilemmas, it is said that "instead of referring to the law and religious sources for guidance, they should instead refer to more appropriate sources such as developmental psychology, professional ethics codes, literature on the philosophy of psychology and existing researches and compilations of professional ethics".

Based on the literature review afore, it is concluded that the practice of Christian counseling and Islamic counseling is recognized by the communities in some countries but not in the others. Legal wise, literatures discussing this issues is scarce and it is revealed from a very limited sources that religious counseling has faced some restrictions. Thus, in order to resolve the research gap and suggest solution for the preceding research problems, this study is conducted to enrich the empirical information and literatures regarding the recognition issue of religious counseling generally, and Islamic and Christian counseling specifically. Islamic and Christian counseling are chosen to be studied and compared due to their active participation in religious counseling movement in Malaysia. The objectives of this study are: (1) to investigate the Malaysian Muslim and Christian counselors' perception on the meaning of recognition; and (2) to investigate the degree of recognition towards the Islamic and Christian Counseling in Malaysia.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to meet the research objectives, this study employed qualitative method. Field study was conducted to survey the recent perception of Malaysian Muslim and Christian counselors' perception on religious counseling. Due to the absence of previous research and insufficient references, a grounded theory, qualitative methodology was utilized to accomplish this task.

There were a total of thirty two respondents in this study, which comprised of registered and non-registered Muslim and Christian counseling practitioners. They could be divided into three categories: (1) religious counseling practitioners (2) Conventional counselors (3) Counselors representing three major authorities in the counseling field in Malaysia, that are Malaysian Board of Counselors, Malaysian Department of Islamic Development and Malaysian

Counselors Association. The Muslim and Christian conventional counselors and the authorities were also included as participants in order to explore their debates and to acquire the views pertaining the Malaysian legal restrictions as well as implications, regarding the research topic.

The respondents were selected through snowball sampling, limited just to counselors representing eight states in the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The limitation was due to time and cost restriction. This type of sampling was chosen because during the research, it has been discovered that there are not so many professional counselors in Malaysia who were dared to declare their practices as religious counseling and they are not well known. In fact, before this research, the Muslim participants themselves did not acknowledge each other due to the absence of active Islamic counseling association that congregates them (after this research, the author has managed to assemble them in conferences). The number of participants was sufficient for the data to meet its saturated point.

The extensive in-depth interviews were conducted using two sets of questions, which were semi-structured questions and unstructured or open-ended interviews. The semi-structured questions were initiated by few prior assumptions regarding the topics to be covered, which later will be utilized to construct list of potential questions. Open ended deeper questions were also probed to the respondents to explore the reasons or justifications of their views, as the theory developed. The interviews were conducted individually, face to face and being audio taped.

Data were analyzed into multiple and branching levels of open coding consists of the task to break down, examine, compare, conceptualize and categorize the gathered data and interviews transcripts. Patterns or meaning units within the text delineated emerging themes and formed the findings of the study. Peer review validity and bias control was utilized as suggested by [22] Cresswell. Peer review process has been done to validate the analysis. Thus, the first and second author of this research had done the analysis separately. To control the researcher bias, participants' verification was accomplished prior to finalizing the study.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Malaysian's Muslim and Christian counselors' perception on the meaning of recognition

There are two major constructs than have been extracted from the findings; firstly the recognition from the society and secondly the recognition by the Malaysian government.

The recognition from the society variables are: (1) accepted by the religious authority (i.e. the church, religious department) (2) received good perceptions; (3) well-known among the community; (4) widely practiced by counselors; (5) large number of clients; (6) minimal rejection; (7) large number of researches and publications.

Whereas the recognition by the Malaysian government variables are: (1) stated clearly in the Malaysian Counselor Act; (2) recognition of certification from religious institutions; (3) practiced formally in governmental institutions; (4) religious counseling programs and researches conducted in public (governmental) colleges and universities;

(5) specific posts for religious counselor practitioners in the public services.

### 3.2.The degree of recognition towards Islamic Counseling in Malaysia.

Generally, Muslim counselors stated that Islamic counseling is just been recognized by the Muslim lay communities, but not by the Malaysian law and government. Nevertheless, when securitizing the above mentioned constructs, their general conclusion is based on just two constructs that are: (1) large number of clients; and (2) minimal rejection from the community. However, some of respondents declared the deficiency of other constructs.

Firstly, the result on the recognition of Islamic counseling from the society. The Muslim respondents identified seven variables: (1) accepted by the religious authority (i.e. Islamic affair department); (2) received good perceptions; (3) well-known among the community; (4) widely practiced by counselors; (5) large number of clients; (6) minimal rejection; (7) large number of researches and publications.

All twenty one Muslim respondents agreed that Islamic counseling is recognized by the Malaysian Muslim authority that is Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) as there are Islamic counselors' posts assigned in the department.

Whereas, while referring to the other variables majority of the respondents (sixteen) concurred that Islamic counseling is recognized by the Muslim community in Malaysia, one respondent (Counselor AA) claimed that it is mildly recognized and four respondents (Counselor SS, FN, MY and K,) declared that is not recognized.

Counselor SS concluded that Islamic counseling is not recognized by the society because it is not widely practiced in Malaysia and the acceptance by the society is very minimal. In addition, Counselor FN claimed that the number of Islamic counseling practitioners is insufficient. Counselor MY justified the lack of recognition is due to the absence of acceptance of the non-Islamic Muslim community and the deficiency of promotion. She argued:

*"In my personal opinion, there are problems within the community. One of it is that the society is reluctant, can Islamic counseling solve their problems? Then, I see from the aspect of their perception, they did not see Islam as their need. Maybe those who practice Islam as their way of life will try to get near [the practice of Islamic counseling], but those who did not really practice Islam as the way of life might say – anyone is ok, the conventional [counseling] also ok. Secondly the exposure, the society needs more exposure [to Islamic counseling] from the authorities, not necessarily from the leaders but maybe from the preachers. For me, there must be [the preaching] about the importance of Islamic counseling, somewhat like the promotion of Islamic counseling. The promotion is important, but if the Muslim community is not Islamic, whatever we do, we still cannot [make them accept Islamic counseling]."*

Counselor K remarked that it is not Islamic counseling alone that is not recognized by the Malaysian society, it is counseling itself that is not being recognized. He claimed:

*"Actually, in Malaysia, the counselors themselves are not being recognized. You try to look at the schools, the*

*community did not really care. I told them, counselor is a bankrupt department or unit. They certainly got mad, but I said I can prove it, and you yourselves also can prove that you are really bankrupt."*

Secondly, when discussing the second construct that is the recognition by the Malaysian government, just three (Counselor AJ, NK and S) out of twenty one respondents claimed that Islamic counseling is recognized in Malaysia, four (Counselor SH, M, WA and T) of them claimed it is not yet recognized, eight respondents (Counselor MA, CA, MD, R, RY, SS, MY and FN) said it is not recognized and six (NE, G, AA, H, MD and MW) of them said that they are unsure.

Counselor AJ and NK justified their view by stressing that the government's recognition is based on the registration or the possession of counseling license issued by the Malaysian Counselor Board. Counselor AJ expressed his view by saying:

*It [Islamic counseling] is recognized if he [the practitioner] did it as a registered counselor. For me, it is not the issue whether the counseling is recognized or not recognized, I stress more on the counselor that is practicing the [Islamic] counseling. Firstly, did he possess the license or not? Secondly, did he fully understand the counseling discipline? And thirdly, if he wanted to declare his counseling is a religious counseling, he must really understand that discipline and he must prove that he is mastering it, then only he could be fully recognized."*

However, Counselor S has a different reason. He supported his view by referring to the recognition by the Malaysian Government's religious affair department and the absence of restriction from the government. He asserted:

*It [Islamic counseling] is recognized because it is recognized by JAKIM [Malaysian Islamic Development Department]. They [the department] have counseling unit. That means that the government recognized [Islamic counseling]. There is a Syar'ie [Islamic] Counseling Department. When we held any programs related to Islamic counseling, there is no restriction from the government."*

Three respondents who viewed that Islamic counseling is not yet recognized gave one same reason. They claimed that the Malaysian government is still in the process to recognize Islamic counseling. The government authorized the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) to draft and Islamic Counseling Manual and that manual is still in the making. The other respondent (Counselor T) gave another reason. He said that the Malaysian Counselor Board is still in the process to design the proposal to recognize specialization in counseling and Islamic counseling is included as one of it.

On the other hand majority (eight) of the respondents alleged that Islamic counseling is not legally recognized by the government. Most of them just 'feel' it is not recognized by the government due to the deficiency of any signal of recognition by the government and among this signal is support. Counselor FN asserted:

*"They don't refrain. They don't say "don't practice Islamic counseling! But I cannot see any support*

*towards Islamic counseling... maybe it is because the ideology, there is no extortion from the policies from the top [government], they [the government] don't see that...I'm afraid to say, God knows...how far they feel it is important or not."*

Counselor CA justified his view by looking at the non-approval by the majority conventional counselors towards Islamic counseling. He said:

*The conventional [counselors] will keep saying that there is no such as Islamic counseling. Why? Don't you read? They don't want to call [named] it Islamic counseling, because when the call [named] it as Islamic counseling, it [Islamic counseling] has a lot of contradictions against the conventional counseling parties.*

Counselor RY supported this argumentation by declaring that most of the interviewers during the registration process were conventional counselors, thus they don't recognized the Islamic way of counseling or therapy. Counselor R also put the reason on the licensing issues, therefore the counseling done by the Islamic counselors who did not possess the license can just be called guidance and not counseling. On the other hand Counselor MY pointed her reason at the absence of formal training or education in Islamic counseling in the government's tertiary institutions. She claimed:

*"There is no training from the institutions. There is no degree in Islamic counseling, right? So, how can we produce the practitioners of Islamic counseling? Even the diplomas offered is not the diploma in Islamic counseling."*

Three of six respondents who claimed that they are unsure whether the Malaysian government recognize Islamic counseling or not substantiated their view by referring to the Malaysian Counselor Act, as they stated that the act silence or did not mention anything regarding religious or Islamic counseling. The other three respondents declared that did not have any knowledge regarding the issue.

Thirdly, the views of Christian respondents on the recognition of Islamic counseling. All of the Christian respondents refused to comment on the recognition of Islamic counseling by the society because of their uncertainty of the actual condition. However, they assumed that it should be recognized by the Muslim community because they undertook Malaysian as a religious population.

On the other hand, surprisingly, it is transpired that most of the Christian counselors agreed that Islamic counseling is recognized in Malaysia legally. Their reason was directed to the practice of what they perceived as Islamic counseling in the governmental Islamic affairs department. They noticed that all Muslims who were involved in marriage problems and divorce application in the Islamic (*syar'ie*) court will be compulsorily referred to counseling unit before any judicious decision is made. Only two Christian respondent (Pastor D and Counselor E) claimed that it is not recognized, with the reason that Malaysian government support secularism and the absence of clear recognition stated in the Counselor Act. Anyway, two Christian respondents stated that they did not have any information on Islamic counseling, thus could not decide whether it is legally recognized or not.

### **3.3.The degree of recognition towards Christian counseling in Malaysia.**

Firstly, the result in the recognition of Christian from the society. The Christian respondents just identified two variables: (1) accepted by the religious authority (the church); and (2) participation of large number of church members or clients;

All eleven Christian respondents agreed that both pastoral and professional Christian counseling are recognized by the church authorities. In fact, Pastor D claimed that counseling is a part of a pastor's duty, he said:

*"One quarter is counseling, one quarter is visiting people, one quarter is outreach, and one quarter preparing message to preach".*

Pastor O also confirmed on the authority given to the pastors to counsel as she said:

*"as about recognition and counselling, when you are pastor you are [then] a recognized authority to do that, so I think generally the society who accept that once you are a pastor you can handle counseling, that is why people bringing the people who need help to us, so [it's]the status of a pastor".*

Counselor A pointed out that counseling play a vital role in the church and in the Christian missionary. She insisted:

*"Yes, I think it has role. It's a tradition that people will go to the church. If we have problem we tend to go to the church. So, there are social and support element in the church".*

Nevertheless Counselor F remarked about the imprecision of the church recognition towards professional Christian counseling and the pastoral counselors training issue, as she said:

*"And the best, the good news, the good news, ya...Is that they [the church] started to see the difference between the professional and the para counsellor we tell them, they come to us. They can't, the most important thing is where they need the counselling, but they can't, you know, they actually see the professional one ya. But how do they recognize is... very... though, I need to know. It's very grey.....And [from National Association of Christian Counselors] so you get that card with you, uh... Is a good start, is a good thing. At least people recognize and they go for training. But how effective that will be and may be, these are just like Malaysian government policies. Is not clear cut. Who is going to define that after attending ten sessions of workshop, are you qualified? Having workshops doesn't qualify you. I have attended one hundred workshops, you know, and you do not learn a thing. So, ya those, I think there's problem these [pastoral counseling]"*

Conferring on the participation of a large number of church members or clients' variable, majority of the respondents (ten) concurred that Christian counseling is well accepted by the Christian community in Malaysia. Just one respondent (Pastor D) declared that is not recognize. He said, the reasons are:

*"First, the young people are nor embracing religion. When we try to get to them, sometimes they get more rebellious. I think it happens in all religion. Not*

*recognized because the religiosity of the people is getting lesser. Number two is the hypocrisy in the profess believers, the number three the inconsistency in the things that we teach, number four the things that we teach and the things that we do are different”.*

Comparing between the pastoral counseling and professional Christian counseling, Pastor Of suggested that lately, the professional counseling is more popular compared to the latter, she claimed:

*“...nowadays, it is very common, everybody goes, everybody can go and also because of availability of more counsellor as professional, and I think it is a constrain in twenty years ago. I seldom hear, is not that common to me, but nowadays is like even school got counsellor you know counsellor teacher and in my time when I was in school there is no. So I think, because of popularity and getting more common, so it actually put down the recognition of just a pastor being a counsellor. The value of pastor as counsellor in the past is higher now as thing goes more zoom in, more professionally and focus the role of pastor as counsellor has decrease. People would want to seek for professional counsellor or counselling unit counsellor center rather than talk to the pastor. That’s my observation”.*

Secondly, when discussing the second construct that is the recognition by the Malaysian government, three respondents claimed that Christian counseling is recognized in Malaysia. Pastor T justified his view by referring to the Malaysian government’s recognition of the pre-marital counseling conducted by churches. He said:

*“It is recognized by Malaysia government, as long as they give certificate to us that mean they recognize it”.*

Both Counselor V and Pastor L agreed that the government will recognize Christian counseling as long as the Christian counselor undergoes the training with certification from the recognized institutions and obtains the license from The Malaysian Counselor Board. Two respondents exclaimed that Christian counseling is not recognized by the Malaysian and government. Counselor E claimed that:

*“We [Christian counseling] are not recognized by the board of counsellors”*

He also suggested that the reason for not been recognized are the scepticism that the Christian counselors might use the opportunity during counseling to convert people into Christianity as he alleged:

*“Maybe they feel that... uh... when we counsel people, from there we can convert them... I don’t know...so maybe if people, they got fear this fear that...I don’t know lah”.*

Secondly, this respondent consider the discrediting of counseling degrees from foreign universities as another reason, he claimed:

*“The training that we received overseas aaa... some of them are very high standard one, compared with the local one la... because you really get the top expert psychologist in... in research and all that... teaching us you know... so we get the benefits of training and then, you know...uh...because we... we... Christian*

*background or because some is even the secular one, but is... I think mine, based in Australia, they don’t recognize. I applied to the board, they don’t recognized...they don’t recognize. They said it is not in our list”.*

Pastor D regarded that religious counseling is not recognized because the Malaysian government is secular, he claimed:

*“I think no, it’s not recognized. I think they support the secularism”.*

Three respondents (Counselor N, A and F) perceived that the recognition status in unclear because the matter is not plainly stated in the Malaysian Counselor Act. Counselor N said she was unsure because the Act silenced about the practice of religious counseling. Counselor A remarked:

*“I think it is not clearly recognizable, but I noticed a movement to get there...If you are not a registered counsellor, you cannot collect the fee...Some sort of other it is recognized, when there is education to train the counselor”.*

Counselor F indicated:

*“The Act itself, not clear, we have really good leaders, pastor, which have been in the field for many years, helping people and helping church member and some of them doing a really good job, doing a good job. Even if they are not trained, even if they have experience, their life experience, so how do you define, you define, you know, given a fresh grads in Master and compared to the one who have seen many lives changed you know. Fifteen years of counselling, families of difficult issues and compared with us fresh graduates, only doing a few hours and get our license, and call ourselves licensed. And where to draw the line and...and...and...so The Act itself, I think, so fine, itself, I don’t know. And there are more things to The Act again, that you have to really look into all these, maybe, because sometimes certain Masters, you do not need qualifications, you need alive experience like Master MBA. Yes, and when...so... where these people are so mature, they are so good you know. Their experience much more than a fresh graduate. Ya, in that sense there is the... more to be considered in that act, in the policy to follow through that you need to look into it, consider in these, to see into it and how to balance and how to draw the line. How to get recognition and to those people who are really trained. Ya, and...and of course they are not in the field of professional counselling but you know, as in the middle. They can do certain jobs. But they can do here, they are helping people”.*

Two respondents (Pastor O and Pastor P) were not aware about the law or the government’s recognition towards religious counseling. Pastor P just guessed that the government did not recognize religious counseling.

Thirdly, the views of Muslim respondents on the recognition of Christian counseling. All of the Muslim respondents declared that they don’t observe the practice of Christian counseling. However, some of them assumed that it is highly recognized by the Christian community and authority due to the establishment of the National Association of Christian Counselors (NACC) in Malaysia. Whereas, regarding the legal or the recognition by the government dimension, most

of the respondents assumed that all religious counseling including the Christian counseling is facing the same issues faced by Islamic counseling.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the Muslim and Christian counselors in Malaysia defined recognition of counseling as the recognition from the society and the recognition by the government. It is also concluded that both Islamic and Christian counseling are recognized by the religious authority and the community but not recognized by the Malaysian government. Comparatively, counsellors from both religion has shown same major trends in terms of the definition of recognition and the degree of recognition. The difference is just in the elaboration on the meaning of community recognition as the Muslim counselors added five extra variables to the two variables mentioned by the Christian counsellors.

The main factors that promoted the recognition by the community are the acceptance by the religious authority and the preference or high number of clients. This research has also supported the hypothesis that the vagueness or reticence of Malaysian Counselor Act that did not state anything regarding religious counselling as the main factors that signify the deficiency of recognition of religious counselling including Islamic and Christian counselling by the Malaysian government. Additionally, the other main factors that lead to the absence of government recognition are lack of support from the government, training issues and the non-approval by the conventional counselling practitioners.

Finally, this research has proven that religious counselling in Malaysia has a promising future, as it is recognized by the Muslim and Christian community. Furthermore, there are efforts by the government to move towards legal recognition as reported by some respondents.

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