Research Article

The Creed of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* in Islamic Law Framework

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The creed of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamaah* (the people of the sunnah and the community) is the largest denomination of Islam, followed by majority of Muslims in the world. In the case of Malaysia, Islam has been acknowledged as the religion of the Federation, while *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamaah* is well accepted as Muslims' creed and serves as the main source of reference especially in matters arising from Islamic doctrine However, it is undeniable that there are other creeds that do not conform to this creed such as Shia, Qadiyani as well as modern western ideologies such as humanism, pluralism, liberalism, rationalism and so on. These distorted theological sects and ideologies practice some deeds that are contrary to Islamic law such as *mut'ah* or temporary marriage, intense devotion to a particular individual, defining the legal ruling using logical reasoning and so on. These phenomena have led to misunderstandings especially among the young generation, thus leading to negative cultural practices that would impede the survival of the Muslim civilization in Malaysia. Therefore, this qualitative study is developed based on library research data. As a result, this article aims to elucidate the framework of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamaah* creed that should be preserved to keep up with the coming challenges to Muslims. Subsequently, it proposes several efforts and solutions that need to be considered for preserving the survival and status of this creed in Malaysia. **Keywords:** The creed of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamaah*, theological sects, deviant teaching, Muslim community.

INTRODUCTION

The creed of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* has developed as the mainstream for the most part of in the Muslim world. The Malaysian Constitution (2002) established Islam as the religion of the Federation. Article 3 (1) has determined that Islam is the religion of the Federation, but other religions may be practiced peacefully in any part of the Federation. Article 3 Clause 2 states that in every state except the state without a king, the position of the king as the head of Islam in his state and to the extent recognized and declared by the constitution of the state, all rights, privileges, sovereignty and powers possessed by him as the head of Islam is not disturbed and defective, but in any act, practice or ceremony that has been agreed by the Conference of Rulers to cover the whole Federation, then every other king in his nature as the head of Islam shall allow Yang di -Pertuan Agong to represent him.

The Muzakarah of the National Fatwa Committee which convened on 5 May 1996 has decided that Muslims in Malaysia should only follow the teachings of Islam based on the beliefs of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* in terms of creed, sharia and morality. The ruling has also shaped the world view of the Muslim community which also influenced the development of civilization in Malaysia.

According to Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady (2010), Muslims in Malaysia comprehended Islam holistically with the teachings of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* as a creed that has united them. The creeds of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* adherents are based on the teachings of Imam Al-Ash'ari, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) according to the Shāfiʿī school and morals are guided by Imam al-Ghazali's Sufism.

In general, Muslim community in Malaysia follows the sect of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* in terms of theology and the Shāfiʿī school in terms of *fiqh*. This school is de facto the official school of Islam in Malaysia. This official status is not obtained by decree or legal sanction or court but through administrative practice in issuing fatwas and practices in the Syariah Court. From the chronological point of view, the history of Islamic administrative law in Malaysia emphasizes the Shāfiʿī school, especially in the issuance of fatwas (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1994).

The emergence of non-Sunni theological streams such as Shiites and the challenges of heretical groups such as the Darul Arqam movement and anti-hadith groups against orthodoxy sunism as supported by Malaysian scholars in religious practice and perceptions of some current issues such as women's rights and freedom to choosing a religion (the question of apostasy) in the 1990s caused traditional scholars to either occupy official positions in government or otherwise react aggressively to the aforementioned challenges. Severe action has been taken against the Shiites and the Darul Arqam movement through the gazetting of fatwas banning the activities of these groups and the arrest of their leaders under the Internal Security Act. While the action against the anti-hadith group is only through gazetting prohibition of group activities without involving any arrest under the Internal Security Act although in terms of challenges to Islamic teachings, the activities of this group are more critical than the Darul Arqam movement (Ahmad Hidayat Buang, 2003).

The Shiite movement and the activities of the anti-hadith group are indeed a challenge to the homogeneity teachings of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* in Malaysia as the challenge of the young people to the homogeneity of Shāfiʿī *fiqh* held by traditional scholars in the past. The response to this challenge is the same, which through control by using governmental instrument through the issuance of fatwas. The fatwas issued in the states set out three points:

1. Declaration that the belief of Muslims in the state is *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* in terms of faith, sharia and morality.

2. Convictions other than *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* are in contrary to Islamic law.

3. The dissemination of any teachings in any form other than the belief of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* is prohibited (Terengganu Government Gazette 1997).

The above fatwa clearly shows the attempts of traditional scholars in collaboration with the country's political authorities to ensure the uniformity of the Muslim beliefs in Malaysia in the homogeneity of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*. This has indirectly made sunism the official sect of Malaysia. These fatwas show that the Malaysian government is working hard to prevent non-Sunni thinking from spreading and taking root in the Muslim community (Ahmad Hidayat Buang, 2003).

History of the Development of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*

From a historical point of view, it is not known exactly the date of the emergence of the school of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*, as well as about the figure who began to introduce the name of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*. Its appearance is very different in a few variations. It is different from the Shiite and Kharijites streams because the emergence of these two groups is politically motivated, especially the politics of Muslim leadership. Therefore, the Shiites and Kharijites can be said to be the two earliest religious political parties born in the history of Muslims (Abdul Shukor Hussein, 1998).

According to Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah (1986), the school of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* is a school that has existed since immemorial time and was already known before Allah created Abu Hanifah, Malik, al-Syafi'i and Ahmad. It is a school of companions who originated from their Prophet. They agree that the consensus of the companions is an argument but they disagree about the consensus of the next generation of companions.

Ibn 'Abbas (ra) once mentioned the term *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* when he interpreted the words of Allah (s.w.t) meaning: (On the day (some) faces will be whitened and (some) faces will be blackened; and as for those whose faces have been blackened it will be said unto them) the angels in-charge of hell will say to them: (Disbelieved ye) in Allah (after your (profession of) belief?) in Allah. (Then taste the punishment for that ye disbelieved) in Allah (Quran, 3: 106).

In the verse, Ibn 'Abbas interprets the faces of those who become radiant white are *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* and the scholars, while the faces of those who become pitch black are heretics who are astray (Ibn Kathir, 1988).

It is reported that Imām Ayyūb Al-Sakhtiyānī (d. 131H) – Allāh have mercy on him – said, "When I hear of the death of a man from *Ahl al-Sunnah*, it is as if I have lost a part of my body" (Al-Lalika'i, 2001).

Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161H) once said: "Let you do good to the *Ahl al-Sunnah* because they are the merchants." He also said: "If you hear that a man in the east is a follower of the Sunnah, then send salaams to him, for *Ahl al-Sunnah* are becoming very few" (Al-Lalika'i, 2001).

Al-Fudayl ibn 'Iyad (d. 187H) once said: "The Murji'ah think that faith is the utterance of words without practice; Jahmiyyah, on the other hand, thinks that faith is *ma'rifah* without the utterance of words and practices; and *Ahl al-Sunnah*, on the other hand, think that faith is *ma'rifah*, the utterance of words and practices (Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, 1402H).

Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim b. Sallam (d. 224H) states in the preface of his book entitled al-Iman regarding the belief that must be followed in deepening the knowledge of faith is the belief of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim b. Sallam, n.d.).

Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241H) stated in the preface of his book al-Sunnah: "This is the school of scholars, *ashab al-athar* and *ahl al-sunnah* who adhere to al-Sunnah which is known for its footsteps and is followed by the ummah starting from the companions of the Prophet (s.a.w.) to this day (Ahmad b. Hanbal, n.d.).

The above facts explain that the term *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* is already known and used among the companions and also the Salaf scholars. This fact completely rejects the opinion of Mustafa al-Syak'ah (1979) who stated that the naming of *ahl al-Sunnah* was initially aimed specifically at the group of al-Asya'irah and anyone who followed in the footsteps of that group, then the scope of ahl al-sunnah began extends to include the founders of sects and scholars of jurisprudence such as al-Syafi'i, Malik, Abu Hanifah, Ahmad b. Hanbal, al-Awza'i and others. He also claimed that the naming of *ahl al-Sunn*ah only appeared in the 7th century.

In fact, the development of kalam which was pioneered by *ahl al-Hadith* progressed in the 3rd century. At that time, several books have been produced that represent the school of *ahl al-Sunnah* such as *Khalq Af'al al-'Ibad*, *al-Ikhtilaf fi al-Lafz* and books written by al-Darimi. It is clear from the birth of these books, the existence of theological streams among the scholars of al-hadith which eventually formed as one *firqah* as opposed to the *firqah* al-Jahmiyyah, al-Mu'tazilah and Kharijites. After that, they became known as *ahl al-Hadith* and *ahl al-Sunnah* (Ali Sami al-Nasyar, 1854).

Ahmad Amin (1980) asserted that the naming of *ahl al-Sunnah* already existed before al-Asy'ari and al-Maturidi, that is, to a group that called themselves *ahl al-Sunnah* to reject the arguments of al-Mu'tazilah.

In conclusion, the basis of the introduction to *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* can be seen through their commitment to the Qur'an and al-Sunnah as the main source of reference over others. In addition, they look up to the generation of companions, *tabi'in* and hadith scholars because through this path, religious knowledge can be learned and be certain of (Al-Ash'ari 1409H).

Definition of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*

The scholars have tried to find out which group is meant by *al-Jama'ah* which is the group that survived as explained in the hadith of the Prophet (s.a.w.): Awf ibn Malik reported that the Prophet (s.a.w.) said, "The Jews split into seventy-one sects, one of which will be in Paradise and seventy in Hell. The Christians split into seventy-two sects, seventy-one of which will be in Hell and one in Paradise. I swear by the One Whose Hand is the soul of Muhammad, my nation will split into seventy-three sects, one of which will be in Paradise and seventy-two in Hell." It was said: "O Messenger of Allah, who are they?" He said: "The main body (*al-Jama'ah*)" (Ibnu Majah, 3992).

In general, the opinions of scholars in relation to *al-Jama'ah* are as follows (Al-Syatibi 1988):

1. The largest group (*al-Sawad al-A'zam*) from Muslims. This is based on the words of the Prophet (s.a.w.) narrated by al-Hakim meaning: Allah will never let my Ummah agree upon misguidance, and the hand of Allah is over the group (Jama'ah), so follow the great mass of believers (*Sawad al- 'Azam*), and whoever dissents from them departs to hell".

The meaning of the term *al-Sawad al-A'zam* is a group of the majority of people who gather to obey the authority and follow the straight path (Ibn al-Athir, 1979).

This opinion is quoted from Abu Ghalib who stated that *al-Sawad al-A'zam* is a group that is safe from division. The religious matter they agreed on was *al-haqq*. Whoever violates them, then he dies in a state of ignorance whether what they dispute is a matter of the Shari'ah or about the imams and their rulers because it violates *al-haqq* (Al-Syatibi, 1988).

Based on this statement, included in the meaning of *al-Jama'ah* is the group of mujtahids of the ummah, the scholars and also the practicing supporters of the Sharia. Those other than them are also included among them when they follow in their footsteps. Whoever comes out of their congregation, then he is a deviant group who falls into the devil's trap. The same goes for heretics because their practices contradict the practices of the earlier groups of this ummah. Therefore, under any circumstances, they do not belong to the group of *al-Sawad al-A'zam*.

2. The group of scholars, jurists and hadith scholars from among the *mujtahidin* scholars. This is because Allah has made the mujtahid imams as an argument over the creatures and the creatures accept their religious teachings. They are the group meant by the words of the Prophet (s.a.w.): "Allah does not gather my people in matters of error forever" (Al-Hakim).

3. The companions of the Prophet (s.a.w.) in particular, did not include the generation that came after them. This is because they have upheld the pillars of religion and strengthened their joints. They are also the group that never gathers in deviant things (Al-Syatibi, 1988).

This opinion also fits the narration of *al-Jama'ah* mentioned by the Prophet (s.a.w.) in a hadith narrated by al-Tirmidhi: "Those who follow the path of my life and also my companions".

4. The *Ahl al-Islam* group when they support the Islamic order or the *Ahl al-Ijma'* group who agree on a single matter whether it involves Islamic law or belief (Al-Syatibi, 1988). This opinion is inferred from the hadith narrated by al-Hakim which means: "Allah does not gather my people in matters of error forever".

5. Muslims who follow a leader. This is the opinion of al-Tabari who asserts that what is mentioned in the hadith which states the obligation of congregation is the obedience of the person who appoints a leader. So whoever violates his oath, he is expelled from *al-Jama'ah* (Al-Syatibi, 1988).

After stating these opinions, finally al-Syatibi (1988) concluded that what is meant by *al-Jama'ah* is to be united under the leadership of an imam who adheres to the Qur'an and the sunnah of His Messenger. It is therefore clear that being united above anything other than the Qu'ran and the sunnah of His Messenger means to stray from the meaning of *al-Jama'ah* as understood in the hadith.

In short, *Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamā'ah* is a generation of companions and tabi'in who are united in following the clear truth of the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.) (Muhammad Khalil al-Harras, 2001).

In other words, anything that comes from Rasulullah (s.a.w.) and also the *sirah* of the companions (r.a.) is a truth that must be followed and emulated. Every person who comes after them by following their path and following their sunnah, then he is included in the group of *al-Jama'ah*, both individually and in congregation (Al-Misri, 1413H).

Al-Bukhari (d. 256H), on the other hand, thinks that *al-Jama'ah* refers to scholars, jurists and hadith scholars from among Imam *Mujtahidin*. This is because Allah (s.w.t.) has made them an argument over human beings and they are also a reference in religious affairs (Ibn Hajar, n.d.).

Al-Tirmidhi (d. 279H) states that the scholars interpreted *al-Jama'ah* with jurists and hadith scholars. Al-Tirmidhi also mentions a narration from Ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181H) who asserted that *al-Jama'ah* was Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and Umar al-Khattab. Then he was asked again: Abu Bakr and Umar had long since died. He said: so-and-so. It is said again: so-and-so are also dead. He replied: Abu Hamzah al-Sakri is a *Jama'ah* (Al-Tirmidhi, n.d).

Ibn Hazm (1395H) defined *Ahl al-Sunnah* as those who are referred to as *Ahl al-Haqq* and groups other than them are known as *Ahl al-Bid'ah*. They consist of the companions (r.a.) and all those who follow their *manhaj* namely the *tabi'in*, hadith scholars and their followers from among the scholars of *fiqh* generation after generation to this day and their followers consisting of the common people in the east and west.

Al-Saffarini (d. 1188H), on the other hand, argues that *Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jamā'ah* are *Ahl al-Islam* and *Ahl al-Tawhid* who adhere to the crescent sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.) in the field of theology and *nihal*. Their inner and

external worship is not tainted by the heresy of *Ahl al-Ahwa'* and *Ahl al-Kalam* in the field of theology (Muhammad bin Ali bin Sallum, 1983).

Prof. Dr. Hamka, on the other hand, argues that the *Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jamā'ah* are the people who follow the sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the mujtahid scholars who issue independent opinions as a result of their ijtihad. The people who believe in the Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali sects in the matter of *furu'* are the *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, while the Shiites, Kharijites and Mu'tazilah are not included in it. Similarly, the supporters of heresy who add, let alone reduce the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) are not included in the group of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. In the science of Kalam, the school of al-Asy'ari and al-Maturidi is the school of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (Umar Hasyim 1999; Mohd Radzi Othman and O.K. Rahmat, 1996).

Based on the above opinions, it can be concluded that *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* is a group that adheres to the teachings of the Qur'an and the sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and what their companions, *tabi'in* and followers to this day committed to either through words, deeds or beliefs and coincides with those sources. Therefore, those who are heretics and the public who do not imitate are not included in the *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. This is because heretics as well as the general public are not a group that can be emulated and followed and they are the ones who actually follow the scholars who belong to the group of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*.

Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah is also considered as *al-Firqah al-Najiyah* based on the hadiths above because they are saved from the error and the torment of the hell in addition to them following the *manhaj* of the Qur'an and the sunnah of His Messenger. Apart from that, *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* is also known as *al-Ta'ifah al-Mansurah* because they are the group protected by Allah to bear the responsibility of religion and fulfil the trust of Islam until the Day of Judgment (Al-Misri, 1413H).

Rasulullah (s.a.w.) said in a hadith that: 'There is always a group among my people who defend the truth until the decision of Allah comes, they remain in a state of defending the truth' (Sahih al-Bukhari; Muslim).

The classification polemic of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*

The question of who actually belong to the group of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* is also an issue that is debated among *al-firaq* to the claim that they are the real supporters of the stream of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Shiite Imamiyyah Rafidah claimed that they were the group called by Rasulullah (s.a.w.) as *al-Firqah al-Najiyah* and *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Mu'tazilah also claimed that they were also *al-Firqah al-Najiyah* and *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* based on their fabricated hadith (Ibn al-Murtadha, 1316H).

Also, al-Asya'irah also named themselves *al-Firqah al-Najiyah* and *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. The scholars of Kalam al-Asya'irah always mention in their essays that all the views and arguments presented in a single issue are based on the *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (Al-Baqillani, 1963). In fact, al-Saffarini has divided the *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* into three groups, namely al-Athariyyah led by Ahmad b. Hanbal, al-Asy'ariyyah led by Abu al-Hasan al-Asy'ari and al-Maturidiyyah led by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (Muhammad bin Ali bin Sallum, 1983).

The division of ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah into three groups, namely al-Athariyyah (Salaf), al-Asy'ariyyah and al-Maturidiyyah can be questioned because *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* which is *al-Firqah al -Najiyah* is in fact a sect mentioned by the Prophet (peace be upon him) in a hadith narrated by Ahmad and Ibn Majah. Furthermore, al-Asya'irah disagreed with the Salaf regarding al-Sifat al-Khabariyyah. The Salaf attribute the attribute without any *takwil* while al-Asya'irah attracts it in accordance with the perfection of Allah (s.w.t.) (Abi al-Izz al-Dimasyqi, 1987).

While according to Uthman el-Muhammady: "What is meant by *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* is the teachings and practices that come from the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his companions as it turns out from the hadith that mentions Muslims will be divided into 73 groups, only one survivor, namely those who are called as a safe and true congregation, who adhere to the principles of life of the Prophet and his companions, they are *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*" (Muhammad Uthman el-Muhammady, 2011).

In explaining who *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, Imam al-Murtadha al-Zabidi (1989) mentioned in his book *Ithaf al-Sadah al-Muttaqin* that: "When Ahlu Sunnah Wa al-Jamaah is mentioned then what is meant is Asya'irah and Maturidiyah".

Imam al-Subki stated in *Tabaqat al-Syafi'iyyah al-Kubra*:"And Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari is the imam of the Sunnah school, Imam al-Mutakallimin, the enforcer of the sunnah of the Prophet, the protector of Islam and the main advocator in maintaining the faith of Muslims (Al-Subki, 1976).

While as-Safarini (2008) also mentions in his book *Lawami' al-Anwar al-Bahiyyah*: "*ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah* has three groups; the first group is al-Athariyyah whose imam is Ahmad bin Hanbal (r.a.); the second group is al-Asya'irah whose imam is Abu al-Hasan al-Asy'ari (r.a.); and the third group is al-Maturidiyah whose imam is Abu Mansur al-Maturidi.

Among modern scholars, Sheikh Hasan Ayyub (1986) in his book *Tabsit al-Aqaid al-Islamiyah* mentions: "Sunnis are Abu al-Hasan al-Asy'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi and those who follow the path they both follow, the way of the *salaf al-soleh* in understanding matters related to faith".

Sa'id Hawwa (1993) also stated in *Jaulat fi al-Fiqhayn al-Kabir wa al-Akbar*: "Indeed, Muslims throughout the ages have imams in creed, *fiqh* and Sufism. Therefore, their imams in the faith are Abu al-Hasan al-Asy'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi".

Sheikh Wahbi Sulaiman Ghawiji (2008) through his book *Arkan al-Islam* mentions: "And the first person to write a book about Usuluddin and reject the suspicion of those who deviate in the faith is Imam Abu Hanifah (r.a.) through the method of *nas* and intellect, and followed (his method) by the scholars after him, namely Abu al-Hasan al-Asy'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi".

Clearly shows that the interpretation of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah* according to most scholars is referring to the Asya'irah and Maturidiah. However, it should be noted that this interpretation does not reject other streams as long as it does not deviate from the context that adheres to the Qur'an and the sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.) This includes the stream of methods of *ahl al-hadith* led by Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal who is also known as al-Athariyyah. Asya'irah and Maturidiah are mentioned as imams of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah* because they are individuals who rose up to defend Islam which also hold similar *manhaj* of al-Quran and hadith when the stream was suppressed by heretics, especially Muktazilah at that time.

From all the opinions on the meaning of *al-Jama'ah* above, it can be concluded that;

1. *al-Jama'ah* refers to unity according to an imam who fulfils the requirements of sharia. So it is obligatory to adhere to this kind of *al-Jama'ah* and it is haram to come out of it.

2. *al-Jama'ah* is the path taken by the *Ahl al-Sunnah* with *ittiba'* and stay away from *ibtida'*. This is also the group known as the school of *ahl al-haqq*. Based on this understanding, some interpret the meaning of *al-Jama'ah* as a friend, *ahl al-'ilm* in various disciplines, *ahl al-ijma'* or *al-sawad al-a'zam*. All these terms return to the same meaning that is "anyone who follows the path of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his companions", whether they are few or many in accordance with the position of the people scattered in various places and times. Therefore, 'Abd Allah b. Masʻud once said its meaning: *Al-Jama'ah* is something that conforms to *al-haqq* even if you are alone (Abu Syamah, 1401H).

In another narration, 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud also said which means: *Al-Jama'ah* is something that is in accordance with obedience to Allah even if you are alone (Al-Lalika 2001).

Manhaj *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah*

Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah has a clear *manhaj* in creed and law. They have placed the Qur'an, Sunnah and Ijma' as the main sources in the creed and the law, while the common sense and innate nature as the complementary sources to the creed. This method thus rejects the things of heresy that always appear throughout the ages. The following are the *manhaj* used by *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah* (al-Qahtani, 2001):

1. Using arguments and propositions based on authentic *Naql* sources. Islam is a revelation-based religion that has the absolute nature of placing the Qur'an as the first foundation. The emphasis on this evidence of revelation is clearly used as a method by Asya'irah scholars, especially when discussing matters of divinity, destiny, the actions of slaves and so on. The next source after the Qur'an is the arguments based on the *mutawatir* hadith, the Sunday hadiths whether authentic or *hasan*, *ijmak* and rejecting fabricated hadiths in order to preserve the true faith.

2. Combining the role of intellect and *naql*. Although the Sunni scholars make revelation the main thrust, but the role of the intellect is not set aside, even combined by placing it as a supporter of what is brought by revelation. The importance of this argument of reason can also be seen to play a role in the epistemological debate of knowledge which is often become the introduction to the books of Asya'irah and Maturidiah. This balance is a privilege that makes the stream of Asya'irah and Maturidiah as a group that survives from falling into extremism whether they are too rigid on the text and too open in interpreting the Islamic texts.

3. Practicing the Sharia perfectly and balanced and does not raise matters that are *furu'* to the *usul* (roots). The failure to deal with the difference between *furu'* and *usul* that makes these extremists easily trapped in the issue of accusing for infidels and heresy in the practice of Muslims in matters of *furu'* and *usul*.

4. Manhaj *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* clearly practices the concept of *wasatiyyah* in its beliefs. For example, in determining the source of faith, *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* takes a moderate approach between the two extreme streams in the selection of their source of faith. In the history of kalam, there is a clash between the group that limits the use of reason in understanding matters of faith and the group that is only guided by the appearance of the verses of the Qur'an and Hadith alone which eventually led to the emergence of the group Muktazilah and Mujassimah.

5. Manhaj *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* stipulates that faith with confidence in the heart, confession with the tongue and doing good deeds with the limbs. *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* stipulates that deeds are a condition to the perfection of faith. In other words, faith is not perfect without practice. Therefore, the deeds of those who commit immorality do not reach the point of denying the faith in their hearts, instead they are considered depraved (*fasiq*).

Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah School: Problems and Challenges

Malaysia has traditionally adhered to the beliefs of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* since immemorial time. This causes the use of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* as the main sect in the faith has taken root in the Muslim community. Any form of influx of the opposite stream is considered as an element and poison that can confuse society and in turn threaten the harmony of Muslims in this country (Muhammad Uthman el-Muhammady, 2011).

According to Prof. Emeritus Datuk Dr. Abdul Shukor Husin (1998), the fact that Muslims in Malaysia who are so consistent and uniform in the application of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* in the faith indirectly contribute to the political stability, society and unity of the ummah.

Wahhabi Stream

The existence of various other streams that are beginning to arise among Muslims in Malaysia is a challenge that needs to be faced. Malaysian Muslims face the Wahhabis who are the starting point of the Younger Generation (Kaum Muda) insistence that the belief that Muslims must hold is three *tawḥīd*; Rububiyyah, Uluhiyyah and Asma' wa Sifat. This group wants the verses of *mutasyabihat* not to be elaborated (*takwil*) as the Asya'irah and Maturidiah groups do. In addition, they also raise questions in matters of *tawassul*, visiting the grave, *maulidur* Rasul celebration and so on (Abdul Hadi Awang, 2008).

They also reject the Asya'irah stream that has been practiced traditionally in addition to rejecting the school of *fiqh* held so far. The existence of Wahhabi sects that differ in views and practices with generally accepted sects in the country has caused anxiety and division in the Muslim community in Malaysia. The study also found that this trend is threatening the unity and solidarity of Malaysian Muslims today (Zakaria Stapa, 2014).

In fact, the Wahhabi issue is not a new issue that now needs to be translated, composed, debated or revived. This is because this issue has been long-established in the Malay Peninsula with the emergence of a group called *Kaum Muda* in the early 20th century. It is the result of the behaviour of some Malaysian and Indonesian students who had the opportunity to study religion in Mecca, Egypt and India. At that time the state of Mecca was influenced by the Wahhabi movement which supported the ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jauziyyah, while in Egypt arose the Islah movement pioneered by Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Ridha. Such a situation also occurred in India with the development of the teachings of *Waliyyullah al-Dahlawi* (Mohd Aizam bin Mas'od, 2013).

In Malaysia, the Salafiyyah dakwah movement brought by the *Kaum Muda* was eventually better known by the public as a Wahhabi group. The young people are very synonymous with the Wahhabi ideology given their relatively

aggressive way of movement. Furthermore, the title Wahhabi is a call that is often chanted by the traditional enemies of the Wahhabi tribe such as the *tareqat* groups and the Asya'irah sect of Sufism. This is a fact that cannot be distorted by any party. Conflict has indeed occurred between the Kaum Muda and Older Generation (Kaum Tua) a long time ago, but after sometime, this issue has been silent, there are those who hit the drums again to create an atmosphere to invite the community to talk again about this increasingly isolated issue (Mohd Aizam bin Mas'od, 2013).

Justice in Judging the Wahhabis

In conclusion, we must be fairer in evaluating the parties involved in this issue, Wahhabis in Malaysia should be addressed as an issue that arises as a result of the fanaticism and ignorance of some supporters and followers. It should not be punished to the extent that it involves those who have nothing to do with this issue. For example, the issue involving Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim as well as the banning of their books until the trend of 'labelling' of great scholars including accusing Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi as a Wahhabi, even any scholar who contradicts Asya'irah is included in the Wahhabis.

The great figure of modern Asya'irah scholars, Dr. Muhammad Sa'id Ramadhan al-Buty when asked about the actions of the group of al-Ahbasy who forbade prayers behind the Wahhabis and the infidelity of Ibn Taymiyyah, replied that the prayers behind the Wahhabis are not haram and the *makmum* prayers are valid. The law of blasphemy as happened to Ibn Taymiyyah is also prohibited, even in another answer Dr. Sa'id described the group of al-Ahbasy as a faction that disbelieved many scholars who disagreed with their opinion, including himself, Sheikh Mutawalli Sya'rawi, Ibn Taymiyyah and Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradhawy (www.bouti.com).

Dr. Yusuf al-Qardhawy was once asked about the allegation that the Muslim Brotherhood movement believed in the Asya'irah sect. He replied: "The allegation that the Muslim Brotherhood included in Asya'irah does not directly reduce their position, this is because the majority of Muslims are Asya'irah and Maturidiyyah. They are *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, their imam is Abu al-Hasan al -Asy'ari, Malikiyyah and Syafi'iyyah with Asya'irah stream while Hanafiyyah with Maturidiyyah stream. Religious universities in the Islamic world are also Asya'irah or Maturidiyyah: al-Azhar in Egypt, al-Zaitunah in Tunisia, al-Qurawiyyin in Maghrib and Deoband in India... then if we say that Asya'irah is not a Sunnah of course we will punish the Muslims as a whole with heresy...while our brother Salafiyyun who criticized Asya'irah absolutely, they made mistakes and went to extremes, by that Asya'irah (indeed) is from *Ahl Sunnah*...despite the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood is not generally Asya'irah, nor does it fight Asya'irah, they rely their faith is first from the Qur'an and second from the Sunnah and then see the views of any party that is best for them..." (Islam Online).

Another example we can take is the fatwa of Muhammad al-Soleh al-Uthaimin (1996) who is a member of the Fatwa Council of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia who is considered a pillar of the Wahhabis, when he was asked about the law of disbelief or blasphemy on *ahl takwil* among Muslims. He replied: "The law of disbelief or blasphemy is not our responsibility, in fact it is the right of Allah SWT and His Messenger, it is included in the laws of *syara'* that need to be referred to the Qur'an and Sunnah, then we must *tathabbut* (examine in depth), then no one is disbelieved or *fasiq* except the person shown by the Qur'an and Sunnah for his disbelief or depravation, because the origin of a Muslim remains his Islam and remains his honesty (`*adalah*) until there is a *dalil syara'* that shows his denial".

The three examples mentioned are enough for us to show the nature of manners and scientific trust that is still held by Sunni scholars even though they may have different views with each other, but they are aware that all of them are still within the circle of Islam and Sunnis. This is what Imam Hasan al-Banna was trying to fight for when he tried to reunite Muslims in his time under the Muslim Brotherhood movement until the birth of Usul al-'Isyrin which set some important foundations to restore the unity of Muslims at that time. Among what he emphasizes is the fact that disagreements exist are unavoidable, but it cannot be used as an excuse for Muslims to divide, in fact the dispute occurs out of love for Allah (to find the true scientific reality) and cooperation to reach truth without any reprehensible quarrels and elements of bigotry (Hasan al-Banna, 1984).

A famous Sufi al-Harith al-Muhasibi as derivate by Jamaluddin al-Qasimi under the chapter *Nasihat li Thalib al-Ilmi'* (advice to scholars) states: "Let you, O students, choose the civilized path towards the past imams, and do not look at their words (negative comments) on other (imams) except with clear evidence. Then if you are able to interpret it and think well of it, then do so, if not then leave what happened among them, indeed you are not made for this (punishing them), so keep busy with what is beneficial to you and leave what is not beneficial to you" (Jamaluddin al-Qasimi, 1407H).

Liberalism and Pluralism

Apart from that, Malaysian Muslims are also facing a stream of western thought that gave birth to Liberal Islamic ideology and religious pluralism which is rooted in the understanding of postmodernism. This ideology is an ideology that demands the right to absolute freedom and hides under the banner of human rights. This understanding also has the potential to result in extreme openness in matters of theology and worship because it demands a reinterpretation of Islamic teachings in the name of openness and modernity. These symptoms are increasingly daring to express their beliefs in the community through the organization of various programs and seminars that lead to those beliefs (Zakaria Stapa, 2014).

This turned out to cause anxiety and unease of Muslims who adhere to the stream of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* which is blatantly contrary to that ideology until finally the 74th Muzakarah of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia which convened in 2006 had to discuss the matter and decided that the movement and stream of liberal thought contained deviant ideology in terms of faith and sharia (www.e-fatwa.gov.my).

Shiite teachings

Next, Malaysian Muslims are challenged again with the spread of Shiite ideology in society which causes division and confusion. The Shiite ideology that deviated from the stream of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* began to gain a place in society and became more daring to express their ideology. This can be seen when they openly set up the Malaysian Shiite Council, send an open memorandum to the Yang diPertuan Agong and make a sworn statement in court. They no longer practice the concept of *taqiyyah* in facing the *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Books on Shiite teachings are also widely distributed (Zakaria Stapa, 2014).

Basically, the Shiite ideology is one of the sects in Islamic thought that believes that Sayidina Ali is more deserving of being appointed as caliph and heir to the Prophet (s.a.w.). The Shiites also believe that, those who are not from the lineage of Rasulullah (s.a.w.) are not entitled to hold the position of caliph and are considered to have seized the right from *Ahlul Bayt* (family of Rasulullah) (Kamaluddin 2014: 14). Some scholars such as Toensing (2007), Jones (2006), Sorli, et al. (2005) and Skocpol (1982) explain, the clash between Sunni and Shiite ideology creates an atmosphere of endless conflict in the Middle East region. Although there are scholars like Mansoureh (2017) who say that the conflict in the Middle East is actually more towards hegemony and power, but there are many who think that this Sunni-Shiite conflict also contributes to the tension.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) through the Secretary General of the Ministry said, until August 2013, an estimated 250,000 Shiites have been in Malaysia (Sinar Harian, 5 August 2013). This ratio makes Shiites a total of 8.3% of the total 30.3 million Malaysians at that time who are Muslims and the majority adhere to the Sunni ideology (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2014).

The massive entry of Shiites into Malaysia is believed to have taken place after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. This revolution saw the fall of the secular leadership of Shah Pahlavi and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Islam in question is Shiite and it is made the official religion of Iran. Although the world gave a revolution in the name of the Islamic Revolution, but it is Iran's agenda to expand the Shiite doctrine in the name of uniting the Islamic state under the concept of *Wilayatul Faqih* which is to put leadership under religious management (Mohd Nakhaie, 2013; Mohammed al-Sulami, 2018). Although the Shiites became the second largest group adopted by the Muslim community after the Sunni ideology, the Malaysian Government decided not to propagate the Shiite ideology in Malaysia through a fatwa decided by the Muzakarah of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia which convened on 5 May 1996 following: "…agreed that the decision of the Muzakarah National Fatwa Committee which was held on 24 and 25 September 1984 (Paper No. 2/8/84, Article 4.2. (2)) on the Shiite stream which stipulates as follows: "After discussing and considering this paper the Committee has decided that only Shiite sects from the Al-Zaidiyah and Jaafariah factions are accepted to be practiced in Malaysia" is abolished".

The issue of apostasy

Nowadays, things that damage the faith happen either through belief in other elements that can lead to shirk or stop practicing Islamic teachings (apostasy). Today's scenario is not only because Muslims experience religious confusion, but also some who want to directly change their faith by becoming an apostate from the teachings of Islam. For some

of these groups, the question of faith is an issue of religious freedom (Abd a-Muta'al al-Sa'di, n.d.). Whereas in Islam, a person who has accepted the Islamic faith is subject to the rules and laws set by the religion. They are obliged to abide by the teachings and commands of Islam and can be forced in complying with the Islamic faith.

Apostasy comes from the word *riddah* from the root word *radda* which means return and is called apostasy because he returns to disbelief (Abu al-Husayn, 1991). According to Ibn Manzur (n.d.), apostasy is to return to disbelief after accepting Islam.

Apostasy in terms of terminology is to leave Islam to disbelief (Wahbah al-Zuhayli, 1989) or disbelief after Islam which is pledged with two words of *syahadah* and obey the law from both (Abd al-Baqi al-Zarqani, 1978). Al-Qalyubi (n.d.), on the other hand, declares apostasy as deciding to hold on to Islam with intention or with words or with deeds either in the form of ridicule, insults or beliefs.

Al-Quran and al-Hadith have clearly stated regarding the law of apostasy on a Muslim. Allah (s.w.t.) says which means: "…and whoever of you reverts from his religion (to disbelief) and dies while he is a disbeliever - for those, their deeds have become worthless in this world and the Hereafter, and those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide therein eternally" (Quran, 2: 217).

The above verse explains that a Muslim who has apostatized and died in that situation, all his good deeds done throughout his life will be in vain. As a result of his actions, he will be kept in the fire of hell in the hereafter (Al-Baydawi, 1988).

The evidence from the hadith that condemns the law of apostasy is the words of the Prophet (s.a.w.) narrated by al-Bukhari, al-Tirmidhi, al-Nasa'i, Abu Dawud and Ahmad meaning: Ibn Abbas (ra) said: The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: "Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him". This hadith explains that a person who has converted his religion by returning to disbelief will be sentenced to death for his actions.

The above texts indicate that the crime of apostasy is a crime that is highly condemned in Islam. Therefore, Islam prescribes the death penalty for anyone who apostatizes or leaves Islam. In this world, he will be subjected to the harshest punishment which is the death penalty and, in the hereafter, he will be thrown into the fire of hell forever.

Today, the question related to the most sensitive creed is with regard to apostasy. According to Syariah Court records between the year 2000 to 2010, a total of 863 cases were referred for the purpose of changing the status of Islam. Of these, 168 cases were approved for apostasy. Meanwhile, according to a report by the independent portal Malaysiakini, that there are 686 applications to change their religious status have been referred to the Syariah Court and out of that, 135 cases have been approved. The highest number of applications occurred in Sabah where there were 238 applications and 67 applications were approved. While in Negeri Sembilan there are 172 applications and 33 cases of them have been approved.

According to a study by Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil, between 2004 and 2011, 42 a total of 137 apostate applications were made in the Selangor Syariah Court. From this list, 75 applicants are of Hindu, Buddhist and Christian descent, while 62 of the applicants are of original Muslim descent. Among the reasons for the apostasy is because they no longer practice the teachings of Islam, are not interested in Islam, have been baptized by a priest, raised by a family of other religions (Hindu) and on the grounds of marrying a partner of another religion. This reason shows that the beliefs of Muslims at the end of this age are becoming looser and willing to turn away from the teachings of Islam in an open manner (Mohamad Zamri Mohamed Shapik, 2013).

Heresy Issues

The issue of heresy is not a foreign thing in the dictionary of Muslim life. This is because it comes in line with human life. However, there are still many Muslims who are so easily trapped by the phenomenon of heresy. Most worrying, JAKIM has listed 125 heretical groups based in Malaysia.

In the case of deviations due to heresy, the authorities have made 87 arrests related to heresy between 2007 to 2011. In 2011, a total of eight active heresies were recorded compared to 2010 of ten teachings. The figure is declining from the previous year and this shows that law enforcement is well implemented.

Based on this number, a total of 19 arrests were made in 2007, 11 arrests in 2008, 40 arrests in 2009, 14 arrests in 2010 and three arrests in 2011. These arrests are based on the provisions on offenses under the state Syariah Criminal

Offenses Enactment. The offenses committed are such as false worship, fabricated doctrine, expanding religious doctrines, apostate acts or words, complicity in apostasy attempts and false accusation offenses.

Heresy is also referred to as heretical doctrine or religious deviation. The meaning of heretical teachings is any teaching or practice brought by Muslims or non-Muslims who claim that the teachings and practices are based on Islamic teachings. In fact, the teachings and practices brought are contrary to the Islamic faith, contrary to the Qur'an and sunnah, contrary to the prominent sect and contrary to *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (Engku Ahmad Zaki Engku Alwi et al, 2015).

Extreme Groups

Apart from that, Malaysia was also shaken by an action from an Islamic militant group that tried to overthrow the government. The group is Al-Maunah led by Mohd. Amin Mohd. Razali. The incident shocked the country after the group seized weapons belonging to the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) at the 304th Battalion of the Territorial Army Regiment in Gerik, Perak. The group has killed three security personnel who were taken hostage when they were besieged in Bukit Jenalik, Sauk. The events of Al-Maunah's attack show that religious issues can turn into issues that threaten national security (Zul'Azmi & Ahmad Sunawari, 2015).

It is no exaggeration to say that the emergence of these extremists has indeed been predicted by Rasulullah (s.a.w.) himself. Rasulullah (s.a.w.) with the help of Allah's revelation has informed the various human nature. In addition to some people who take the middle nature to give birth to a balance of life, there are also some people who go beyond the limits by using the *ghuluw* (extremism) approach in religious life. This is where the importance of Rasulullah (s.a.w.) lies in setting *wasatiyyah* guidelines for the use of Muslims. This element of the *ghuluw* group was later detailed by Islamic scholars. In the latest development, if we compare the details of *ghuluw* found in the time of Rasulullah (s.a.w.) with the jihad movement, it turns out that the similarities are clearly visible. More importantly, all these extreme actions are absolutely contrary to the three *Maslahah Dharuri*, *Tahsini* and *Hajiyyi* contained in the concept of *Maqasid Syariah*.

In the early history of Islam, we can trace some events that involved *ghuluw* element. Among them; first, the story of Dzul Khuwaisirah insulted Rasulullah (s.a.w.) for his unsatisfaction with the way Rasulullah (s.a.w.) divide the spoils of Hunain war: "When it was the day of Hunain, Prophet favored some people over some others (in the distribution of the booty). He gave Al-Aqra' one-hundred camels and gave Uyaina the same, and also gave other people (of Quraish). A man said, "Allah's Pleasure was not the aim, in this distribution." I said, "I will inform the Prophet (about your statement)". The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "May Allah bestow Mercy on Moses, for he was troubled more this but he remained patient" (Sahih Bukhari and Muslim).

Rasulullah (s.a.w.) explains that religious extremists will emerge from the descendants of these people. The scholars state that the next generation of Dzul Khuwaisirah, in later times became the Khawarij. In another hadith, Rasulullah (s.a.w.) describes the characteristics of this group: Surely there will be a descendant of this people; who read the Qur'an, but it did not go through his throat. They killed the Muslims and let the idolaters go. They will come out of this Islam as the arrow comes out of its bow. If I had found them, I would have killed them like the 'Ad people were killed" (Sahih Bukhari and Muslim).

Second, the story of the three Companions of the Prophet who were determined to perform extreme worship. Clearly, the seeds of this extreme attitude were once shown by three companions of the Prophet when they asked Aisha about the Prophet way of worship Three men came to the houses of the wives of the Prophet (s.a.w.) to inquire about the worship of the Prophet (s.a.w.). When they were informed, they considered their worship insignificant and said: "Where are we in comparison with the Prophet (s.a.w.) while Allah has forgiven his past sins and future sins". One of them said: "As for me, I shall offer Salat all night long." Another said: "I shall observe Saum (fasting) continuously and shall not break it". Another said: "I shall abstain from women and shall never marry". The Prophet (s.a.w.) came to them and said, "Are you the people who said such and such things? By Allah, I fear Allah more than you do, and I am most obedient and dutiful among you to Him, but still I observe fast and break it; perform Salat and sleep at night and take wives. So, whoever turns away from my Sunnah does not belong to me" (Musnad Ahmad, Abd bin Humaid, Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Nasa'i, and Ibn Hibban).

This hadith explains about the element of wasatiyyah in performing *al-taklif*. It can be considered as a proactive step of Rasulullah (s.a.w.) so that his people do not get caught up in extreme actions (ghuluw). On the contrary, Rasulullah

(s.a.w.) explains that the nature of piety is not by being extreme, excessive or trivial, but it should be accompanied by a balanced attitude towards various sharia demands.

Third, the story of the Kharijites recorded by Syahrastani. It is noted that they have committed atrocities against a friend of Saidina Ali by splitting his wife's stomach and removing her fetus. After that, while the sword was still covered in blood, they entered a date garden belonging to a Jew. The owner of the garden was scared and said: Take everything you want". The chief Kharijites replied by saying: "We will not take it except by paying the price". What can be understood is that even though they have seriousness in worship; but they legalize the blood of Muslims. Therefore, they do not hesitate to commit violence against Muslims themselves. Sihabuddin Afroni in commenting on the events of Syahrastani's record added that most of the Kharijites are young and have not reached true maturity. As a result, they only prioritize their spirit and emotions, without being grounded in mature knowledge and judgment.

The Kharijites ideology was found to be never extinct, instead it developed secretly in some areas of the Gulf country. What is clear is that the remnants of the Kharijites ideology reappeared when opportunities arose such as the existence of anarchy in Arab society after the events of the Arab Spring. If we compare the extreme nature in the three narrations above with the extreme practices carried out by the jihadist movement, especially ISIS, it turns out that the predictions made by Rasulullah (s.a.w.) is right. This can be seen from the extreme actions taken by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. It became the main material revealed by the western media to prove the inhumane tyranny ratio committed by Muslims. It directly contributes to the poor image of Islam in the eyes of the international community.

Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is part of the discipline of knowledge discussed in the field of comparative religious studies. The word 'dialogue' in Malay means conversation, the conversation in acting, story or whatever form of speech and the exchange of opinions, discussions, negotiations between two or more parties on an issue openly (Noresah et al., 2000). In English, dialogue is derived from the Greek word 'dialectic' which means 'discourse' (Reese, 1996).

Referring to Greek etymology, the term dialogue comes from two words combinations, the first being 'dia' which means 'through', while the second word is 'logos' which means 'word' (Forward, 2001). Dialogue takes place in a variety of situations; spontaneously, frank conversation and 'energetic' debate. This situation provides space and opportunity to understand how the universal view of others and understand the diversity that is indeed a blend of life (Miriam Therese Winter, 2008).

According to Azizan (2008, 25-41), 'dialogue' derived from the root word 'dia' means through what is said (logos), removing something hidden or implied, which is the basis/fact of what actually exists at this time that is actually essential and absolute. In other words, dialogue is a way for us to write implicitly. The ideas and facts of history, culture and environment, will not have any reality and impact on their own because all of them need to be logged or dialogue (Azizan, 2008, 31).

Dialogue is not just a negotiation or a polemic, where the polemic may consider the 'dialogue partner' as the wrong party whose existence is considered a threat. The task or purpose of the polemic is not to hear the truth that may be bitter to accept but the victory of the platform he thinks is being fought for. In Arabic, the dialogue is called '*al-hiwar*', referring to its etymology derived from 'ha, wau, ra'. Ibn Mansur in his book, *Lisan al-Arab* defines '*al-hiwar*' which is dialogue as '*al-ruju*' which means 'return or refer back' (Khadijah & Khairul Nizam, 2005, 100).

In fact, the Qur'an which is the last revelation of Allah was originally a *kalam nafsi* that reached man in the form of a *kalam lafzi* through the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) through the mediator of the angel Jibril (a.s.) is part of the divine dialogue to mankind. The expressions of the Qur'an as in the form of '*amr* (command) through the word *qul* (say); or in the form of exclamation "*ya ayyuha ladhina amanu*" (O you who believe), "*ya ayyuhan nas*" (O man), "*ya ayyuhan nabiyy*" (O Prophet) are some of the forms of dialogue (Ramli 2008, xiii).

Based on the meaning of dialogue in terms of language, then the actual terms of dialogue as formulated by Khadijah & Khairul Nizam (2005, 101) should include matters related to conversations, discussions, conferences between two or more parties that usually occur in a formal and organized atmosphere. While in the implementation of dialogue there are differences of opinion, views and ideas on matters discussed between the parties involved, but the ethics of dialogue is open, controlled and there is respect and while the purpose of dialogue is basically to listen, learn, know and exchange views whether beneficial to all involved or specific parties.

Based on the meaning of the above dialogue, it is clear that in general dialogue is an element of communication and medium of interaction that involves meetings and discussions on an issue that gives rise to differences of opinion, scepticism and misunderstanding between various communities living together. Dialogue is not only limited to matters that discuss the conflicts and crises of society but dialogue also plays a role in fostering equality and sharing of life together. In order to understand the discourse of the dialogue in more detail, further discussion explains the history of interfaith dialogue which reflects the concerns of Muslim scholars on the early development of dialogue as it is associated with Christian missionary activities (Engku Ahmad Zaki Engku Alwi et.al, 2014)

Dialogue in interfaith relations is based on the concept of *'li ta'arafu'* (knowing each other), which is a model of interfaith relations stated by the Quran in surah al-Hujurat (49:13). The principle of knowing each other is a bond of brotherhood among fellow Muslims. While '*li ta'arafu*' between Muslims and non-Muslims refers to *al-Sulh* which aims to build and cultivate peaceful and harmonious situations among themselves (Andek Masnah, 1998). This principle of getting to know each other is also one of the important elements in the model of Muslim-Christian relations introduced by Jane I Smith through the concept of 'getting-to-know-you' (Guillaume, 2007, 12).

Accordingly, the discussion of dialogue in interfaith relations is discussed in the context of the alignment of dialogue according to the Islamic perspective to ensure that each individual dialogist will increasingly in 'knowing the One'. Islamic scholars such as Sayyid Muhammad Thantawi (2004), Abdullah Alwi Hj. Hasan (2005) and Osman Bakar (2006, 1-39) present a dialogue debate in terms of terminology, dialogue methods, ethics and manners of dialogue as well as current issues of dialogue according to the Quranic perspective. The terminology of dialogue in the Qur'an according to Sayyid Muhammad Thantawi is expressed through two terminologies, namely *al-jidal* (debate) and *al-hiwar* (dialogue) as mentioned in surah (al-Nahl 16: 125; al-Ankabut 29:46; al- Kahf 18:34 and 37; al-Mujadalah 58: 1).

Empowerment of Manhaj *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah*

In response to differences and issues that arise, especially those related to the diversity of sects, Muslims in Malaysia are generally encouraged to practice wasatiyyah in their lives. The concept of wasatiyyah is considered as the best way to solve problems that arise in the lives of Muslims in Malaysia, especially in matters related to belief. Wasatiyyah means to achieve the attributes of *mahmudah* that arise from the position of the law of Allah in moderation, goodness, repentance and height that makes him the leader of all ummah, the leader of all nations and be a witness over them in the hereafter. While wasatiyyah in faith refers to the manifestation of simplicity in justice, *istiqamah*, goodness, peace, strength and unity in the principles of faith (Zulkifli bin Mohamad & Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2014)

Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah school clearly practices the concept of wasatiyyah in its beliefs. For example, in explaining the subject of faith where there are those who claim that faith is located in the heart and tongue alone and there are also those who claim that faith lies only in a person's behaviour, *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah* appears as a carrier of the concept of wasatiyyah in line with what is organized by Islam. The opinions of the two groups mentioned earlier were clearly rejected but it was not rejected as a whole but even balanced. For Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah, faith is an oral confession, confidence in the heart and manifested by the actions or deeds (al-Bajuri, 2010).

Actions or practices are also included in the faith, there is not even perfect faith without practice. Faith is verbal accompanied by deeds whose nature increases and decreases (Al-Asy'ari, 2009). This understanding clearly fits the texts found in the Qur'an and hadith. In determining the source of faith, the *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah* stream takes a moderate approach between the two extreme streams in the selection of their faith source.

In the history of Islamic theology, there is a clash between those who limit the intellect in understanding the matters of faith and only guided by the outward verses of the Qur'an and hadith alone, with those who exceed the capacity of the intellect in understanding the matters of faith beyond the text of the Qur'an and hadith. As a result, there are the mujassimah and the Mu'tazilah. Imam *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah*, al-Asy'ari, took the best approach in dealing with this problem. He accepted the *mutaqaddimin* approach and the intellect approach in understanding the religious text but did not reach the level of authority of the intellect as practiced by the Muktazilah. He balances between two streams, namely using the intellect in understanding matters of faith but still in the guidelines of the text of the Qur'an and hadith (Zulkifli bin Mohamad & Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2014).

Wasatiyyah In Encountering Differences

In the broader context, the concept of wasatiyyah in facing differences in streams is very important in maintaining the harmony of the ummah. The view of al-Syahid Imam Hasan al-Banna in describing the nature of Allah (s.w.t.) is a view that is wasatiyyah and should be a guide for all Muslims, especially in Malaysia. In his commentary when discussing the *salaf-khalaf* conflict, he argued that the method used by the *salaf* group which refers to the stream of Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal which is to hand over the meaning of the nature of Allah to Him is a safer way (*aslam*). However, the method of *takwil* practiced by the *khalaf*; namely Asya'irah and Maturidiyah certainly do not lead to depravation and do not contradict. This is because *khalaf* scholars follow the method of *takwil* based on the rules of sharia which do not contradict any *usul* in usuluddin such as celebrating the meaning from the point of view of the Arabic language that is *makruf*.

Similarly, the *salaf* such as Imam Ahmad himself also took the method of *takwil* on certain matters (Zulkifli bin Mohamad & Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2014). This is because both streams despite different methodologies are still within the scope of *Ahl Sunnah*. It requires an effort to understand and avoid conflict because the beliefs of these two groups do not contradict with the true beliefs (Abdul Hadi Awang, 2008).

The Salafi-Wahhabi issue that plagued Muslims in Malaysia has become a protracted polemic that seems to have no end. In fact, it is getting worse with infidels, disbelieving among the two sects. Although the *Salafi* and *Khalafi* are considered within the scope of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah* as described above; which is still held by the majority of Muslims today but lately the Muslim community seems to be trying to widen the gap of difference and each blame each other in the practice of daily worship where such things should not happen.

As Muslims who uphold the command of Allah (s.w.t.) and His Messenger, we need to look at it from a positive angle and try to clear up the confusion caused by those who are trying to destruct Islam. Clearing and restoring the mess will not be completed unless we return to the original source of the Qur'an and the Sunnah entrusted by the Prophet (s.a.w.) to be held forever. Every Muslim should take the best approach in dealing with this issue. Al-Qaradhawi in debating this issue gave a stern reprimanding to Muslims (Hussin Salamo et. Al, n.d.).

"*I want to emphasize here that the khilaf between the two manhaj (salaf and khalaf) does not oblige takfir to each other, with the meaning of punishing him as an infidel with disbelief that can remove him from Islam. So, this is something that is not accepted by the soul of a Muslim and cannot be accepted by the mind of a pious person. How do Muslims come by disbelieving in each other when they all believe in God Almighty, one messenger, one book, one manhaj and prayers facing one Qibla. I see that the error in this issue does not cause ta'thim, tafsiq and tabdi', while even the farthest, it is the difference between the right (two rewards) and the wrong (one reward) or between the right and the better. How can a great pious man dare to accuse the fasiq, sinful or heretical to the leaders of the ummah who have upheld the Islamic law, defended his faith, opposed his da'wah enemies, spent his life as a preacher and a reformer, a pious scholar like al-Baqillani, al-Isfarayini, al-Maturidi, al-Ghazali, al-Razi, Ibn Abd al-Salam, Ibn Daqiq al-'Id, al-Rafi'I, al-Nawawi, Ibn al-Humam, al-Zarkasyi, al-'Iraqi, Ibn Hajar, al-Sayuti and others...and this is the approach of Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taimiyyah and his disciple al-Imam Ibn Qayyim that is; not to accuse sinners to those who are wrong in their representation on usuliyyah or ilmiyyah problems, which means problems related to faith and usuluddin*".

However, in facing the streams that clearly deviated from the ideology of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah*, it is clear that the approach of *tasamuh* cannot be implemented arbitrarily. This is because it is feared that the identity of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah* held by Muslims, especially in Malaysia, will be eroded gradually on the basis of openness practiced. Therefore, a bolder and firmer approach must be taken to prevent this ideology from spreading in society and further damaging the faith of the next generation and causing chaos and instability in the country (Salim ʻUlwan al-Husaini, 2013).

However, Muslims should not forget the approach of kindness to those who profess beliefs to other than *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʻah*. In the face of Shiite ideology for example, Muslims must agree in loving ahl al-bayt Rasulullah (s.a.w.) without *ghuluw* (excessive), interact with them with gentleness and respect, take a peaceful approach, encourage them to reflect on the view of authentic knowledge and then liberate themselves from the shackles of error (Ali Muhammad al-Solabi, 2009).

This approach of love was once practiced by Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal when he was introduced to a young man named Musa bin Hizam who was a teacher to Imam al-Bukhari and Muslim. Musa bin Hizam is said to be a person who understood Murji'ah in the beginning. However, he received guidance through Imam Ahmad who was so diligent to accompany him, discuss gently, calmly, with wisdom and good advice and finally left the heresy of Murji'ah (Muhammad Ahmad al-Rashid, 2014). However, this approach should be seen based on the suitability of the time, place and individuals/groups involved (Engku Ahmad Zaki Engku Alwi et. al, 2014).

Conclusion

Muslims in Malaysia for generations have practiced the beliefs of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* or more specifically the Asya'irah sect. This can clearly be seen in the practice, education and enforcement of laws that are more inclined to the stream of *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*. The situation of Malaysian Muslims who have been comfortable practicing traditionally causes anxiety and division with the rises of other streams that are clearly opposite or those that are considered contradictory. This situation has the potential to damage the harmony of the believers and then threaten the crucial *maslahah* which is unity between Muslims. Therefore, the appropriate approach such as the practice of wasatiyyah concept needs to be strengthened and practiced to address this problem.

Appreciation

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