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Apostasy Factors among Malaysian Students Abroad: A Case Study

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Abstract

This article discusses a case study on the issue of apostasy among Malaysian students studying abroad. This article explains how the student's life traveled until his apostasy. The objective of this study is to explore the journey of how apostates occur among students who are abroad. The methodology of this study uses a qualitative approach that is to use case studies. The use of Snowball Sampling was used in this study focusing on a respondent who is a student who is abroad who has characteristics related to apostasy issues. The chosen respondent was a male student studying at a University in the United States. Analysis of the data obtained as a result of the respondents showed that there is a cultural shock to students, there is no right place of dependence when abroad, influenced by non-Muslim partners and lack of knowledge related to aqidah. These factors can be used to help preachers formulate effective strategies and approaches to help this special population either at the level protection, prevention or rehabilitation.

Keywords: Factors, Apostasy, Malaysian Students, Abroad.

Introduction

The symptoms of apostasy or generally known as "*Murtad*" are greatly spreading in our country. It is undeniable that the issue of apostasy has been going on for a long time as in the case of Nor Aishah Bokhari, Nyonya Tahir and Lina Joy. Nevertheless, we are witnessing that there is no clear provision on this issue of apostasy either in terms of the position of individuals out of religion according to the glasses of the law and also procedures related to it (Hasan & Mohd Ali, 2007). Although the number of apostate cases is relatively small but in reality, it is a cancer of faith that is beginning to spread among Muslims in Malaysia. In this article, the authors focus on apostate factors among students who are abroad. The author will also discuss the issue of apostasy according to the perspective of *syarak*.

Definition of Apostasy

From a language point of view, "*Murtad*" is from Arabic derived from the word "*Riddah*". The Arabic dictionaries explain that *riddah* means returning from something to another. Thus, from a language point of view, apostasy means a person who returns from something to another (Rosman, 2001).

Even from the point of view of *syarak*, with reference to the explanation of Islamic scholars, apostasy is a *mukallaf* Muslim who comes out of Islam either by belief, word or deed, of his own free will (Rosman, 2001).

In Surah al-Baqarah verse 217 states that:

وَمَنْ يَرْتَدِدْ مِنْكُمْ عَن دِينِهِ فَيَمُتْ وَهُوَ كَافِرٌ فَأُولَئِكَ حَبِطَتْ أَعْمَلُهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ
وَأُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ

"And whoever of you is apostate from his religion, he dies while he is a disbeliever, then those who are so corrupted, he perishes his deeds in this world and in the Hereafter, and it is they who are the people of Hell, remaining in there forever."

(Surah Al-Baqarah verse: 217)

It is clearly stated in the Quran that apostasy or *riddah* is a great sin which is not forgiven for the sin of Allah.

"Indeed, Allah will not forgive all sins other than that for whom He wills. And whosoever associates with Allah, he has indeed committed a great sin."

(Surah Al-Nisa": 48)

Thus, apostasy is a person who returns to disbelief after accepting Islam. A person or a group can become an apostate by associating Allah SWT whether through *ikhtikad*, speech or act, disobeying the religion of Islam or a reconciliation thereof or disbelieve in an Islamic ruling that can be clearly and authentically known and the one who disputes that it is not compulsory to be punish by the ruling of Allah SWT. In the crime of apostasy, there are two important elements which are the act of exiting Islam such as the act that can bring shirk is prostration to other than Allah and have the intention do it on purpose (Hasan & Mohd Ali, 2007).

Apostasy According to Islamic Perspectives

Although the punishment for apostate offenders is not explicitly stated in the Quran, it has been discussed by scholars based on *hadith*. The category of apostasy and punishment is divided into three.

- i) An apostate, but hides it.
- ii) An apostate and expose it.
- iii) An apostate and expose it and attack Islam with it.

First Category: Apostates, Yet Hide Them

Apostates but hide it so that no one knows except family members and close friends, are not subjected to the law of *hudud* in the world. Their punishment is with Allah in the Hereafter. It is the apostates of this first category that are repeated repeatedly by the al-Qur'an, one of them:

وَمَنْ يَرْتَدِدْ مِنْكُمْ عَنْ دِينِهِ فَيُوتَ وَهُوَ كَافِرٌ فَأُولَئِكَ حَبِطَتْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ
وَأُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ

And whoever of you is apostate from his religion, he dies while he is a disbeliever, then those who are so corrupted, he perished his deeds in this world and in the Hereafter, and it is they Members of Hell, keep them in it. (Al-Baqarah 2:217)

Syaikh Yusuf al-Qaradhawi *hafizhahullah* explained, Islam does not impose the death penalty for apostates who do not publicize their apostasy and do not call on others to apostate like him. Islam allows him to receive his reward in the Hereafter if he dies in his disbelief (Mohamed & Yaacob, 2000).

Second Category: Apostates and Reveals It

The apostate then exposes it or announces it in any way such as print media, electronic media, internet, Short Messaging System (SMS) and so on, then he is sentenced to death after first being given a period and invited to repent. The Prophet Muhammad *shallallahu 'alaihi wasallam* said:

من بدل دينه فاقتلوه

Whoever converts, kill him. (Shahih Bukhari, no.6922)

There is also a request for repentance, there is a discussion among scholars and it produces five opinions: (Amru & Saleh, 2007).

1. It is mandatory to ask apostates to repent.
2. It is recommended to ask apostates to repent.
3. Must ask apostates to repent.
4. It is compulsory to ask for repentance to those who originally disbelieved, then convert to Islam, then apostate. The demand for repentance is not permissible for people who are originally Muslims, then apostates.
5. Apostates do not need to be asked to repent unless adequately ordered to return to Islam while holding a sword around his neck.

After presenting the above five opinions and analyzing the dalils of each opinion, Syaikh Abu Malik Kamal bin al-Sayyid Salim *hafizhahullah* explained in his opinion, only Allah knows better, that the revelation or messenger delivered directly to the Prophet Muhammad *shallallahu 'alaihi wasallam* only indicates the duty of the death penalty against the apostate. And this is already a basic resolution. However, if the priest (or judge) is of the opinion to delay (punishment) and judge the request for repentance against the apostate as a measure of wisdom that has expediency, then the matter of that can be done, in accordance with the actions of the companions who are (indeed) trusted (Amru & Saleh, 2007).

On the basis of the generality of the word of Allah *Subhanahu wa Ta'ala*:

فَإِنْ تَابُوا وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ فَخَلُّوا سَبِيلَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

Then if they repent and perform their prayers and give zakat, then leave them alone. Indeed, Allah is All-Forgiving, All-Compassionate. (Al-Taubah 9:05)

If referred to the punishment of the figures of *al-Salaf al-Shalih rahimahumullah*, it will be found that they vary in delaying the punishment. Some impose immediate death sentences, some delay them for 3 days, 20 days, a month and so on. It all depends on what neatness it wants to achieve in different cases. However, it is pointed out that even if they vary during the period of delay, in the end the death penalty is still imposed if the apostate refuses to repent or does not show hope to repent (Azhami, 1983).

Third Category: Apostates and Reveals It and Attacks Islam with It

People who apostate and expose it and attack Islam in any way, whether by using weapons, pens, verbal, thinking and using the help of non-Muslims and hypocrites, then they are to be arrested and killed immediately without being given a period and were invited to repent. The exception is if they repent before being caught, then their repentance is accepted.

Regarding this third category apostate, the Prophet Rasulullah *shallallahu 'alaihi wasallam* said:

لَا يَجِلُّ ذِمُّ امْرِئٍ مُسْلِمٍ يَشْهَدُ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَأَنَّ مُحَمَّدًا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَّا بِأَحْدَى ثَلَاثٍ رَجُلٌ زَنَى بَعْدَ إِحْصَانٍ فَإِنَّهُ يُرْجَمُ وَرَجُلٌ خَرَجَ مُحَارِبًا لِلَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ فَإِنَّهُ يُقْتَلُ أَوْ يُصَلَّبُ أَوْ يُنْفَى مِنَ الْأَرْضِ أَوْ يُقْتَلُ نَفْسًا فَيُقْتَلُ بِهَا.

It is not permissible for the blood of a Muslim who testifies that there is no god other than Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah except one of three things, an adulterer after he takes care of His honor with marriage, he was indeed stoned, a man who came out (from Islam and the congregation, then) fought Allah and His Messenger, so indeed he was killed or crucified or exiled and one who kills one soul, then he is killed as a reciprocal law. (Abu Daud, No.4353)

They were arrested and killed immediately without being given a period and were invited to repent according to the statement of Allah *Subhanahu wa Ta'ala*:

إِنَّمَا جَزَاءُ الَّذِينَ يُحَارِبُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَيَسْعَوْنَ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَسَادًا أَنْ يُقَتَّلُوا أَوْ يُصَلَّبُوا أَوْ تُقَطَّعَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَرْجُلُهُمْ مِّنْ خَلْفٍ أَوْ يُنْفَوْا مِنَ الْأَرْضِ ذَلِكَ لَهُمْ خِزْيٌ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا مِن قَبْلِ أَنْ تَقْدُرُوا عَلَيْهِمْ فَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

It is only the recompense of those who fight against Allah and His Messenger, and to do damage on earth, by being recompensed or crossed or cut off their hands and feet crossed or exiled. That is a disgrace in this world for them, and in the Hereafter, they will have a great punishment. Except those who repent before you can catch them, (they escape the

punishment). So know that Allah is All-Forgiving, All-Compassionate.

(Al-Maidah 5:33-34)

Methodology

Research Design

The design of the study is qualitative with the use of case studies. The data and information needed to meet the objectives of the study are collected through the interview method. Interview questions are provided in general without giving guidance to the answers to give the respondents the opportunity to explain and elaborate on their experiences (Shank, 2006). The interview was conducted to better understand the experience of the respondent.

Interviews are carried out to understand more deeply the experiences gone through by the respondents (Rubin, 2005). Among the guidelines for the interview that the researcher has provided before the interview is carried out with the respondents are:

1. What prompted you to change religion?
2. What is the family's reaction to you when dealing with this situation?
3. What caused the complexity to you throughout living life outside the country?
4. What are the implications for your family after you change religion?

However, this question guide is not too bounded and needs to be flexible based on the response given by the respondent and their willingness to continue the conversation. Freedom should be given to the respondent because during the interview period, the respondent sometimes is unable to continue the conversation because he still feels traumatized when recounting the experience that he went through.

According to Lebar (2015) an interview was conducted in conducting a study not intended to answer the question of the study or to understand in depth the experience in life or an event that passed. Written consent from the respondent is required to record the interview. If the respondent does not allow the interview to be recorded or feels uncomfortable using the recorder, a note will be done during the interview session (Noah, 2002). In fact, the pros of making notes compared to using a recorder, the researchers will give their focus and attention more on what the respondent tells rather than relying on the recorder only. Apart from understanding through verbal communication, the respondent's feelings that were shown also need to be understood throughout the non-verbal communication.

Data Analysis

Respondent's Background

The main respondent in this study was Muhammad Salimi bin Abdullah (not his real name), aged 28 and a native of the state of Selangor. He was interviewed during a session that took almost 2 hours. The interview session runs casually interspersed with eating activities. Between the sessions, the researchers also had the opportunity to interview several officers involved and had records related to the case. In the process of preparing this report, the author has a telephone line and whatsapp to ask the respondent additional information or explanation.

Educational Background

Muhammad Salimi bin Abdullah (not his real name) is a Malaysian student studying at a University in the United States. He is a native Muslim Malay born in the State of Selangor. His parents are also natives of Selangor. His educational background was excellent when he was in primary school. He received many outstanding students award awards during the period. Later, he was interested in pursuing his education at a religious school in Selangor, but was opposed by his family. The respondent's family put that there is no guarantee of work if studying at a religious school. Both his parents did not want him to be an *Ustaz* because it is said that the future of an *Ustaz* is not guaranteed and depends only on the religious lecture talks here and there. Therefore, the respondent's family was determined that he continue his students at a boarding school in a district outside the respondent's home area. The distance from his home is approximately one hour and 30 minutes.

During his time at the school, he was very active with school activities and participated in debates between schools until he was successful at the national level. However, the respondent said he had started to feel unhappy with other students who started harassing him. When asked about this issue, the respondents began to cry (dropping tears) and felt disturbed to tell in more detail. The researcher begins to give a handkerchief and tries to calm the respondent and persuade him. Later, when things began to calm down, the respondent stated that he was harassed by a male senior student who walked into his room and forced him to do the things that are wrong on the side of Islam religion. At first the respondent refused and was not willing to be treated as such, but after almost every night being harassed by the senior who came in the group directly force him and hold his genitals until he cries in fear.

He was terrified and reported the matter straight to the school principal and continued to make a phone call to his parents to be removed from the school. At first, the family was a little surprised that at that point the respondent was already in the second month of form five. The family was quite heavy at first and was surprised and shock as to why he wanted to go out. However, the respondent was unable to tell them anything. He just cried and asked to be removed. Due to the situation, the family felt sorry and continued to make the decision to remove the respondent from the school. The respondent felt good to be able to get out of school and the family also gave him the option to choose the school he wanted. The respondent simply chose a regular daily stream school to complete his SPM. His parents had to come to terms with the respondent's request because they loved the child and did not want anything untoward to happen. The family also does not want any element of coercion to the respondent. During his time at the school, he received excellent results and at the same time raised the name of the school which originally the school had never before achieved such a good achievement record. The respondent's name was well known and he is very much liked by the teachers and school friends.

Summarizing the story, after he completed his A Level in Malaysia, he continued to obtain a scholarship for furthering his studies in the United States. Before the migration process took place, he was often pampered by his family where his every request would be fulfilled. The respondent felt highly appreciated because each of his requests got the attention of his parents and there was no barrier to go straight to the United States.

Respondent Change Factors

Culture Shock

When he was there, he told something that was very surprising. At first, he was a little scared because he also studied the knowledge of the Quran and was involved with his teacher. So, he would be afraid if it involved matters that violate the *Shariah* because he knows every verse of the Quran that relates on the *halal* and *haram* in Islam.

According to him, on the first day he entered the apartment or better known as a hostel for the University students, he had seen his roommate having sex openly. He was very surprised that he had never seen anything like this. During his time in Malaysia, he was very attentive. However, what a force it is when it happens every day is the roommate's routine and he has also become happy to see the damned thing.

According to him, in the second year, he had already started to leave his prayers, his eating consumption was also unattended and cannot tell the difference between halal and haram. He often likes to eat chocolate and the chocolate content has no sign of halal. He did not feel that anything was wrong anymore at that point. He was friends with some Malaysian students there. The respondent also said he was shocked when his best friend had quit Islam and converted to Christianity. He felt that his friend's actions were correct where the religion was entitled to be chosen.

Over time, the respondent also began to be distracted and being tested. The respondent failed during the semester and was asked to repeat the semester. He continued to feel hopeless and very upset. He did not tell anything to his family. He began to feel that Allah was unfair in his life. The biggest conflict in his life was when he began to blame Allah for everything that happened. However, this cannot be hidden from his family when they received a letter from the scholarship sponsorship regarding the extension and failure of the semester. The family was also quite surprised and began to question about the cause of the failure.

Lack of Religious Upbringing

The respondent stated that he did not study *aqidah* knowledge during his stay in the United States even though there was a community of Muslims who held the classes. He is more comfortable searching for information obtained on Google without teaching with more *mursyid* people. However, he has studied about the Quran only in online classes with teachers who are in Malaysia. The class only lasted for the first 2 years of his studies.

Friend Influencers

According to the respondent, at that point he had already started to feel depressed and began to tell the truth about what happened from the very beginning he reached the United States. He also told of his friend who was an apostate but still hiding from his family. The respondent's family was quite worried when they heard everything about the respondent's storytelling and asked to stay away from the friend. However, respondents continued to be friends with him regardless of his parents' advice. The respondent was aware of this situation and caused him to feel right with the actions of his friend who left Islam. He himself disputed where Allah was when he needed it. He questioned his failure and blamed what happened because Allah does not love him and Allah does not exist.

He began to feel that every success that happened to him was by his own efforts rather than happened at the will of Allah. He began to oppose anyone who brought religious affiliation to his life. The family began to realize that through the tone of his talk and the distant conversation. The change began to be felt by the family of the respondent.

Family Respondents

After he finished his studies, he returned to Malaysia and stayed with his family for 2 months before being placed in an organization that sponsored his scholarship. During his 2-month period with his family, he did not perform the obligatory prayer, *sunnah* including the Friday prayers. The matter was first noticed by family members and family members began to discuss with each other methods to reprimand him in order to bring the respondent back to his normal self. The family also began to worry about the case of a friend who had been told of the apostate. The friend is still close to the respondent and the respondent often goes to his home in Malaysia despite the different states. This adds to the concerns of the respondent's family members with this change. The respondent's appearance was also quite lint and not the same as before going to the United States.

According to the respondents, awareness and feelings of wanting to change again occur when the family begins to ask him frankly. They are worried about this situation and always give him a call and preach to return to his normal self. To date, the respondent is still supervised by the family and always seek advice from the family. Family support is always there for respondent. Yet the mindset of the respondent changed a lot and the changes were drastic. The respondents objected to any religious issues implemented by religious groups in Malaysia. He downplayed each of those issues. He was also heavily involved with the demonstrations and writings that caused controversy.

Self-Progress At Work

According to the respondent, he was placed in an organization far from his home and required a travel time of about 7 hours. His employer is a very good person and always emphasizes matters related to prayer. He was always reprimanded regarding the prayers because he did not perform the prayers during his time there. When colleagues began to realize that he was not praying, some began to insinuate and criticize him. However, there are some who began to preach to him. The friend began to invite him to pray but was always rejected by the respondent. He felt that his environment was quite disturbing to him and began to question individual rights. He once stated that he does not harass others so he does not like to be disturbed. However, a good fellow of the respondent did not give up and always invite him to pray and sometimes invite the respondent to return to their hometown together so as to get to know the respondent more closely.

Apart from leaving prayers, he began to make friends with individuals involved with drugs. This is also quite troubling for the family when a friend who has been involved in drugs was taken to the respondent's house. The life of the respondent seems uncontrollable where no one else can reprimand his every action. A lifestyle that is far from religion and a self-deprecating ego prevent him from accepting every other person's point of view or idea.

According to the respondent, he used to practice an act of pretending while with his family. When dealing with family, he tries to reduce something wrong from the family's point

of view. The respondent said he felt he was hypocritical and as long as he could continue to live this life. He only cared about his career and began to ignore his family. He rarely returned to his hometown with his family because he felt uncomfortable about the religious advice presented.

However, he has already begun to feel that life is empty and always in trouble. However, he is confident that he will try to get out of the problem without Allah's help. He is confident of doing it himself. Despite being tested in various situations during his work, he remained with his stance and began to find ways to escape from his family and individuals from his workplace that he felt uncomfortable. He then decided to pursue his PhD in the United States. He was determined to go there even though the parents found it hard to agree after what happened.

Respondent's Perception of the Preacher

Among his messages to the preacher was not to be too hopeful to see the effects of the preach in a short time. The way back is too difficult and not many have the strength to change completely. "Not everyone will be like me". He recounted some of his friends who had been apostates without their family's knowledge. Among the second advice is that the preacher only expects the reward of the hereafter. The preacher must strive while waiting for the reward of the hereafter.

Sincerity also needs to be taken care of. According to him, these people are very sensitive and do not like anyone to criticize their actions. They will easily detect if anyone underestimates them. When they feel humiliated, they will no longer be interested in continuing the interaction. These words were suppressed also many times by the interviewed respondent.

Discussion

From the results of interviews and observations, the factors of the occurrence of apostasy are as follows

1. It is the religious and family upbringing that is a factor in the occurrence of apostasy.
2. Halal and haram food is not taken into account.
3. The sin of seeing vices and committing vices is also engraved in the heart.
4. The test struck itself and began to blame Allah and was not convinced of Allah's provisions.
5. The main trigger when another friend is also an apostate and the relationship gets closer causing the thinking pattern to start to change.
6. Support from the family is there but there is still less action.

Suggestions

Focus on recovery and not just looking for the cause.

1. Start with good relationships, love, unconditional acceptance.
2. Focus on the *Aqidah* before *Fiqh* - create beliefs and awareness of the hereafter, fear the hereafter, and hope only in Allah.
3. Provide lifestyle alternatives that they can see for themselves.
4. Accepting that migrating is staggered and time consuming. The preacher should be patient and tolerant of distorted thoughts and behavior in violation of the *Shariah* that

has yet to be corrected. Focus on the *Aqidah* and prayers first, then the step of abandoning the prohibition of Allah SWT. It consists of daily five-time prayers, finding a halal income, eating halal food and attending religious classes on a regular basis.

Conclusion

The issue of Apostasy became a challenge for the preachers and the families involved to address it. The issue is getting worse when society does not care about them and continues to label them as human beings who have no religion and need to be shunned. This article has shed light on every experience and factor in apostasy as well as the actions that can be done by preachers to help them regain understanding of the correct *Aqidah* and comply with the *Shariah*.

Religious upbringing is very important. The right religious upbringing will give the individual a clear path to follow. However, today's scenario shows society only emphasizes worldly knowledge over the afterlife. Among the strengths of the earlier Muslims was the result of a very strong religious basic upbringing. Religious upbringing is not only born from the school system but can come from a family institution. Islamic teachings are very important to make children aware of Islam which is *syumul*. Lack of religious upbringing will cause a person to lack knowledge in considering a matter between *halal* and *haram* and the other basic matters.

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