

The Significance of Correct Faith as the Fundamental Pillar of Unity: An In-depth Analysis

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Abstract

Faith (*'aqidah*) stands as the most crucial aspect in Islam. Strengthening one's faith renders a person a better Muslim, while neglecting it might lead a Muslim astray into unfavorable paths. In this context, unity stands as one of the imperative mandates in Islam. Unity serves as the key to the strength of the Muslim community and even to a nation as a whole. Through the method of document content analysis, this paper examines the significance of a sound faith as the primary core towards achieving unity among the Muslim community. Consequently, this paper identifies two major factors contributing to division: political and religious factors. Focusing on the religious factor, this paper concludes that adhering firmly to the authentic faith based on the Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah principles is essential, as it is through this path that genuine unity can be attained. In the context of Malaysia, the reinforcement of the Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah faith needs to be continually emphasized to maintain the existing unity.

Keywords: Islamic Faith, Ahli Sunnah Wal Jama'ah, Unity, Division, Malaysia

Introduction

Islam, as bestowed by Allah SWT to humanity through the intermediary of the angel Jibrail AS to Prophet Muhammad SAW, encompasses three primary components: faith (*'aqidah*), Islamic law (*shariah*), and morality (*akhlak or tasawwuf*) (Reported in Muslim). Among these three, faith concerning the Pillars of Faith (Rukun Iman) serves as the pillar or foundation in constructing the Islamic religion (Al-Buti, 2009: 70). This aligns with the purpose of sending messengers, which includes summoning humanity to worship and worshiping Allah SWT alone. Allah SWT says: "And We sent not before you any messenger except that We revealed to him that, There is no deity except Me, so worship Me" (Surah al-Anbiya', verse 25).

Faith (*'aqidah*) refers to a strong and firm belief in something (Ibn Faris, 1991: 4/96). In a detailed sense, faith involves firmly holding and allowing in the heart a certain belief without any doubt, to the extent that the soul finds tranquility in that belief (al-Ghazali, 2005: 1/117). In a more specific context, faith involves matters of belief in the concept of divinity (Allah SWT), prophethood, and the unseen as decreed by Islam based on accepted evidence. This

belief distinguishes whether someone falls into the category of being a Muslim or a disbeliever (Rashidi, 2015: 36-50). Therefore, faith stands as the most crucial matter in Islam, as per the famous saying, “the beginning of religion is knowing Allah”. Consequently, studying it becomes an individual obligation (*fardu ‘ain*) for every accountable person (*mukallaf*).

Faith as the Foundation of Unity

Given its significance, faith (*‘aqidah*) doesn't merely serve as the basis for *shariah* and morality (*tasawwuf*), but it also stands as the cornerstone for all matters in the lives of Muslims. One aspect highly emphasized by Allah SWT is unity, avoiding division and hostility among believing Muslims. Allah SWT says: “And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you - when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers.” (Surah Ali ‘Imran, verse 103).

Similarly, another Quranic verse states: “He has ordained for you of religion what He enjoined upon Noah and that which We have revealed to you, [Muhammad], and what We enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus - to establish the religion and not be divided therein.” (Surah al-Shura, verse 13). Upon careful examination, the command for Muslims not to be divided in both of these verses is coupled with the directive to hold firmly to the Islamic faith (i.e., belief) first. Therefore, it's understood that a correct and steadfast faith serves as the foundation and foremost matter that Muslims should adhere to in achieving unity. In other words, unity cannot be attained without the bond of faith.

If we delve into the biography of Prophet Muhammad SAW, his initial preaching in Mecca was centered on matters of faith (*‘aqidah*). The strength of the faith he instilled successfully built a shared ideology and unity among the Muslims (al-Buti, 2006: 62-63). This unity expanded further when he migrated to Medina. The Prophet actively fostered brotherhood between the Muhajirin and Ansar, as noted in the Quran: “And those who believed and emigrated and fought in the cause of Allah and those who gave shelter and aided - they are the true believers. For them is forgiveness and noble provision.” (Surah al-Anfal, verse 74).

He also facilitated unity between the Aus and Khazraj tribes in Medina, who had long been at odds, thereby averting threats and disturbances from the Jewish community (al-Buti, 2006: 147). Allah SWT says: “Indeed, the believers are brothers. So make peace between your brothers and fear Allah that you may receive mercy.” (Surah al-Hujurat, verse 10). In essence, the success of Prophet Muhammad SAW in fostering unity among the Muslim community was centered around the unity of their faith. With the blessing of this unity, the Muslim community was able to establish an Islamic state in Medina, fortify defenses, ensure the safety of its people, expand the reach of Islamic teachings, thwart threats from enemies of Islam, and more.

After the era of Prophet Muhammad SAW and his companions, discord emerged among the Muslim community, leading to its division into various groups or factions (al-Ash‘ari, 1990: 1/65). To address this division, which initially stemmed from political issues but later extended to matters of faith, scholars highlighted the term “Ahli Sunnah wal Jama‘ah” to represent the true teachings of Islam followed by the majority of Muslims at that time, aiming to distinguish it from various deviant sects or beliefs. In general, Ahli Sunnah wal Jama‘ah refers to a group of Muslims who follow in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad SAW (and his companions) in understanding and practicing Islam, encompassing faith (*‘aqidah*), Islamic law (*shariah*), and morality (*tasawwuf*) (Rashidi & Fauzi, 2018: 1-37).

Among the prominent scholars who advocated for the concept of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah were Imam Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 330H), the founder of Asha'irah, and Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333H), the founder of Maturidiyyah. Their dedication to championing the faith of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah effectively curtailed the influence of various deviant sects such as the Mu'tazilah (Rashidi & Fauzi, 2018: 1-37). Certainly, both these scholars not only successfully defended the true Islamic faith and left behind a wealth of beneficial knowledge but also indirectly contributed to reducing the discord and division within the Muslim community. The majority of Muslims returned to adhering to the recognized path of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah, characterized by moderation (*wasatiyyah*).

The Creed of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah in Malaysia

In the context of the Malay Archipelago, especially Malaysia, quoting Husin (1998: 7), former Chairman of the National Fatwa Committee MKI, in his book "Ahli Sunnah Waljamaah: Rediscovered Understanding," it is stated, "The majority of Muslims in Malaysia, and even in this region, have for centuries accepted and practiced Islam based on the Ahli Sunnah Waljamaah approach until it became so dominant and influential. This fact has made Malaysia, and this region, the most consistent and stable in terms of adherence to creed, Shariah practice, and value systems (morality) compared to Muslim societies in other regions. This situation indirectly contributes to the stability of political structures, society, and the unity of the ummah. The Ahli Sunnah approach that is embraced by the Malaysian Muslim community in terms of creed and belief is the understanding and schools of thought of Asha'irah and Maturidiyyah."

From the above statement, it is understood that the majority of Muslims in Malaysia adhere to the creed of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah, particularly the Asha'irah school. This adherence has successfully shaped a harmonious, organized, and unified society. Therefore, even though the Federal Constitution only mentions Islam as the religion of the Federation (Article 3(1)), the position of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah is explicitly stated in State Constitutions and Islamic Administration Enactments as the official school of thought in each state. For instance, the Kelantan State Constitution states: "Ahlu's Sunnah wal Jamaah means the schools of thought of Abu Al-Hassan Al-Asha'ri and Abu Mansoor Al-Maturidi and those who follow their footsteps" (Kelantan State Government, 2008: 59).

This is not surprising, as the entire Islamic world also adheres to Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah, whether Asha'irah or Maturidiyyah. According to a study conducted by The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre (2010: 17), it is stated that Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah represents the majority stream of Islam, accounting for 90 percent of the global Muslim population. This study aligns with the statements of scholars like al-Zabidi (1989: 2/8), who specify that Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah refers to the Asha'irah and Maturidiyyah schools. Therefore, the religious adherence of Malaysian Muslims based on Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah in terms of *'aqidah*, *shariah*, and *tasawwuf* is significant and remains the majority practice among Muslims worldwide, from the past until now.

The Factors of Division in Contemporary Malaysia

Lately, unity among Muslims in Malaysia seems to be diminishing. Observations indicate that issues related to religion and politics are major factors contributing to this division. Touching briefly on the division caused by politics, parties that should serve as tools for democracy in selecting leaders have turned into arenas for animosity and hatred among fellow Muslims. Each group focuses solely on gaining power, regardless of the means used. If this continues,

they are essentially trapped within the agenda of Western liberal democracy, inadvertently sidelining the welfare and unity of the Muslim community as mere slogans (Rashidi, 2023). Certainly, Islam prohibits its followers from engaging in such behaviors and instead commands them to show love and compassion towards fellow Muslims. The saying of Prophet Muhammad SAW, "A believer to another believer is like a building whose different parts enforce each other." (Reported in al-Bukhari and Muslim). Another narration states, "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." (Reported in al-Bukhari). Both of these Hadiths clearly emphasize the obligation for every believer (with true faith) to express love and compassion towards fellow Muslims. This affection and care will foster unity and solidarity among them.

However, what needs to be focused on here is the division caused by religious factors. In this context, the emergence of various deviant sects and teachings deviating from the creed of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah recently has had a negative impact on the unity of Muslims in Malaysia. The Conference of the National Fatwa Committee of the Malaysian Islamic Religious Affairs Kali Ke-106 dated 21-22 October 2014 discussed the Threat of Non-Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah Movements to the Unity of Muslims in Malaysia, deciding "that in terms of legislation, Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah is the official school of thought in Malaysia and the Shia and Salafi-Wahhabi movements currently pose a serious threat to the survival of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah. Both of these schools of thought can bring about conflicts and divisions within the Muslim community in Malaysia" (Paper JFK No. 4/106/2014).

To curb the spread of Shia and Wahhabi ideologies in society, several states have issued fatwas to elucidate the discrepancies of these two movements. Thus, starting from 2010, states have issued fatwas regarding Shia and Wahhabi as contradictory to the creed of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah and the majority of Muslims' beliefs. Not only that, according to the National Security Policy (National Security Council, 2021: 40), the propagation of ideologies other than Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah could also have implications in terms of national security. Their ideologies diverging from the middle path (*wasatiyyah*), if not controlled, could spawn radical acts of violence as seen outside the country. They misunderstand the teachings of Islam, interpreting them wrongly and literally, making them terrorists who misuse the name of religion (Rashidi et. al., 2022: 151-173).

Besides the Shia and Wahhabi sects, there are many other beliefs conflicting with the creed of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah, including new ideologies like secularism, liberalism, atheism, and so forth. All of these have contributed to unrest and division among the Muslim community in Malaysia, which predominantly adheres to the creed of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah. In summary, strategic steps need to be taken at every level to strengthen the adherence to the creed of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah and minimize the number of those influenced by such ideologies (Rashidi et. al., 2022: 134-153). This is crucial to ensure the continuity of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah in Malaysia, given that a firm understanding and practice of the true creed (Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah) is believed to be the primary foundation for fostering unity among the Muslim community.

Conclusion

As elucidated, the authentic creed of Islam is based on Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah. Firm adherence to the creed of Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah enables a Muslim to fulfill all the commands of Allah SWT and those of His messenger. Unity is one of the crucial aspects emphasized in the religion of Islam. The strength of a nation also lies in the unity of its people. In the context of Malaysia, the majority of its population is Muslim. Hence, unity among the

Muslim community automatically fosters unity and balance among the entirety of Malaysia's populace. Therefore, it is important for the Muslims in Malaysia to be equipped with true knowledge based on Ahli Sunnah wal Jama'ah. Anything that surfaces to cause division must be obstructed and abandoned.

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