

Misinterpretations of Islam By Malaysian Atheists on Facebook: A Content Analysis

Kauthar Razali, Aman Daima Md Zain, Muhammad Rashidi
Wahab, Siti Nur Amalina A'dilah Muhamad

Faculty of General Studies and Advanced Education, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin,
21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia

Corresponding AuthorEmail: kautharrazali@unisza.edu.my

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze Malaysian atheists' posts on Facebook pertaining to Islamic teachings in Malaysia. Specifically, it focuses on three fundamental themes: the concept of deity (faith), the holy Quran, and the practice of worship within the Islamic faith. The analysis scrutinizes content shared in Malaysian atheist social media groups on Facebook spanning from 2018 to 2022 to identify misconceptions related to the selected themes. The findings reveal that the existence of God can be substantiated through the science of mantic. Concerning Al-Quran, it is demonstrated that its revelation is a divine miracle, firmly distinct from human creation. The act of fasting as a form of worship is also subject to specific conditions that either oblige an individual to fast or allow for non-fasting due to health-related issues.

Keywords: Atheist, Malay, Social Media, Facebook, Malaysia

Introduction

Religion has been a fundamental aspect of human existence since the time of the first human, Prophet Adam (a.s.). Belief in a higher power emerged early in human history. Some scholars who compare different religions categorize them into two groups: revealed religions, often called "heavenly religions", and natural religions, also known as "earthly religions". Islam, Judaism, and Christianity fall into the category of revealed religions. Among these, Islam stands out as the only religion that has maintained its adherence to monotheism, worshiping the one God, Allah the Almighty, since its inception to the present day. On the other hand, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism are considered natural religions because they originated from human philosophical thought rather than divine revelation (Abdullah, 2000).

However, the idea that rejects the existence of God started to emerge within the realm of Greek philosophy. Among the early proponents of this notion was Epicurus, a renowned philosopher of that era (Abd al-Halim, n.d.: 88-90). Over time, this perspective continued to

gain traction until it evolved into a novel belief system, spreading within Islamic civilization. The zenith of atheistic thought within Islamic civilization occurred during the 8th century of Hijra, primarily among philosophers who were influenced by Greek philosophical ideas. This particular faction is referred to as the *Dahriyyun* group, which posits that everything exists without a divine creator. Al-Ghazali also termed them the *zindiq* group (al-Ghazali, n.d).

The *Dahriyyun* group's beliefs can be divided into two categories. The first group asserts that God created the stars in the sky, causing them to move so vigorously that they burn uncontrollably and cannot be extinguished. The second group contends that everything in existence on Earth has no origin and that all events are natural processes that will eventually decay over time (Kharuddin, 2022). Furthermore, the formation of the "Atheist Republic" organization, established by Armin Navabi, a former Muslim turned atheist, has garnered significant attention from atheists worldwide, including Muslims who are increasingly inclined towards atheism in the present era (Shoaib, 2018).

Across both Western and Islamic histories, the notion of denying the existence of God is not new, as it has persisted since ancient times and continues to expand in sync with technological progress. The ease of information dissemination, unrestricted by geographical boundaries, has facilitated the global spread of atheistic ideas. This trend has also extended to Asian nations like China, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In Malaysia, there are active atheist communities on social media platforms like Facebook, with one notable example being the group known as *Warung Atheist* (Muhammad & Hanisah, 2018), which includes Malay members.

While Dr. Asyraf Wajdi served as the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in 2017, he noted the presence of individuals adhering to non-religious beliefs who actively engaged on social media platforms like Facebook. Furthermore, there were organized social media initiatives aimed at acknowledging and promoting non-religious perspectives in Malaysia, including events like the gathering of the Kuala Lumpur branch of Atheist Republic. Consequently, the ministry department submitted a report to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) with the intention of curbing the growth of the atheist movement and its activities.

The internet has played a pivotal role in the widespread dissemination of these ideas. With the advent of internet technology, information from around the world is easily accessible and can be shared rapidly, even when dealing with sensitive topics. According to 2015 statistics, 17 million out of Malaysia's total population of 30.51 million people were active social media users (Kemp, 2015). Previously, religious matters that were considered sensitive and seldom questioned are now openly discussed on social media platforms. People now feel more confident to express their views, including those who question the concept of divinity within the Malay Muslim community. Malay Muslims are typically known for practicing Islam. According to the Malaysian constitution, Act 162(2), a Malay is defined as someone who follows Islam, adheres to Malay customs, and predominantly speaks Malay. This constitution underscores the inseparable connection between Malays and Islam. If an individual renounces Islam, they are no longer recognized as a Malay under Malaysian law. This article will examine the misinterpretations of certain issues on Facebook that have faced criticism from Malay atheists.

Methodology

This article employed a content analysis method involving the examination of writings by Malay atheists on Facebook spanning the period of 2018 to 2022. The objective is to scrutinize their misinterpretations concerning three key topics discussed within this Facebook group. These topics encompass the rejection of monotheistic concepts related to *Rububiyyah* and *Uluhiyyah*, the Quran, and various aspects of worship. The views expressed are dissected and analyzed from the standpoint of the authors.

The Definition of Atheists

Metaphysically, the rejection of God's existence is attributed to Atheists/Atheism (Kai, 2021). The term "Atheist" has its roots in the Greek language, where "a-" signifies "none" and "theos" denotes "no God" (The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 2015). In philosophical lexicons, atheism is defined as a mode of thought that lacks belief in God and opposes the concept of worship. The philosophical evolution of secularism has contributed to a perspective that dismisses the existence of God and is deemed as a barricade to human freedom (Tonny, 2019).

The emergence of the secular science philosophy has led to an outlook that dismisses the existence of God and is perceived as limiting human autonomy (Tonny, 2019). Religion is regarded as a mere fantasy and illusion in this perspective. Religious rituals are deemed inconsequential since they cannot be empirically assessed (Charles, 1991). In this viewpoint, only reason is embraced, and revelation is rejected as a source of knowledge for understanding the entire natural world. In the Western context, this perspective defines the concept of God in terms of 'exist/be/have/there' and 'none/nothing'.

The concept of 'be' implies that everything in the world possesses observable properties and substances. Conversely, Rashyidi (1970) indicated that the concept of 'nothingness' refers to entities devoid of form or genuine substance. This conceptual framework has resulted in categorizing God as belonging to the realm of 'nothingness', signifying the absence of tangible substance. In Arabic, those who hold atheistic views are referred to as *al-ilhad* (الإلحاد), wherein the letters *lam*, *ha'*, and *dal* convey the idea of deviating from the righteous path. *Alhad al-rajul* (الْأَحَدَ الرَّجُلُ) denotes a man who has strayed from the path of truth, as well as someone who has departed from the genuine faith, as elucidated by Ibn Abidin (Ibn Abidin, 1433H).

Atheism is also classified in Arabic terminology as *dahriyyah*, *zindik*, and *mulhid*. The term *dahri*, *dahriah*, or *al-dahriyyah* is used to describe a group that asserts the natural occurrence of this world without a creator (Dewan, 2007) or *mulhid*, a group that denies the existence of God (Dewan, 2007) and does not have faith in the Day of Retribution (Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabi al-Asasi, 2003). The concept of *al-Dahriyyah* is elaborated upon in Surah Al-Jāthiyah, verse 24.

وَقَالُوا مَا هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا وَمَا يُهْلِكُنَا إِلَّا الدَّهْرُ وَمَا لَهُم بِذَلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ

"And they argue, "There is nothing beyond our worldly life. We die; others are born. And nothing destroys us but the passage of time." Yet they have no knowledge in support of this claim. They only speculate."

This group, referred to as the materialist group, asserts that everything occurring in the world is brought about by natural forces and dismisses the notion of God as the creator of all worldly phenomena (Khairuddin, 2022).

Meanwhile, it is suggested that the term *zindik* may have its origins in the Persian language, which is *zan-din*. Another perspective posits that the term *zand* or *zend* means explanation of the scriptures found in the *Zaradusht* or *Zoroastrian* stream (Zakiah, 2009). *Mulhid*, on the other hand, is derived from the terms *alhada*, *yulhidu*, *ilhada* signifying deviation, involvement in wrongdoing, and disparagement of truth. *Mulhid* can also refer to someone who slanders and distorts religious beliefs (Al-Asasi, 2003). Atheists incorporate two fundamental elements of atheistic thought, namely identity and ideology, from a socio-political standpoint. The ideology they embrace consists of liberalism and secularism. Liberalism, in this context, signifies an independent and open-minded perspective that is not confined to a single school of thought (Kamus Dewan, 2007). Secularism, as defined in Kamus Dewan, refers to a belief system that separates religion from everyday affairs, particularly in matters of public administration (Dewan, 1994).

Hence, it can be deduced that atheism originated from the introduction of Western philosophy, characterized by liberalism and secularism. Atheist ideologies revolve around seeking freedom from religious convictions and avoiding adherence to religious laws in worldly matters. According to the provided definition, this perspective represents a group that rejects the belief in God's existence, asserting that nature evolves autonomously. They assess all matters through rationality and advocate for the removal of religion from human life, contending that religious beliefs hinder rational thinking in humans.

The Malays in The Malaysian Constitution

A Malay is referred to as a Muslim according to Article 160 (2) of the Federal Constitution. A Malay is someone who adheres to Islam, speaks the Malay language, and adheres to Malay customs. This constitution establishes a strong connection between being Malay and being Muslim. Consequently, if a Malay individual decides to renounce Islam or convert to another faith, they will no longer be recognized as Malays under the Constitution. As a result, they will not be entitled to the special privileges granted to Malay *bumiputera*, as outlined in Article 153 of the Federal Constitution. Therefore, any attempt by Malays to leave Islam is considered a breach of the Constitution, as affirmed by a Federal Court decision that rejected the application of Lina Joy, a Malay woman who sought to renounce her Muslim faith (Nisar, 2020).

The emergence of Islam in the historical context of Malaya, predating the establishment of Malaysia, has played a pivotal role in shaping the identity of the Malay ethnicity. Over time, the Malay identity has been gradually molded and impacted by Islamic religious doctrines. This influence is evident in various aspects, including the adoption of Arabic names like Faridah, Ahmad, and Muhammad, which replaced traditional Malay names such as Puspa, Putera, Aduka, and Melati. Similarly, Islamic teachings have left their mark on worship practices, culture, clothing preferences, language, and culinary traditions within the Malay community (Andaya, 1988; Barnar, 2004; Yaacob, 2009)

According to Frith (2000), the term 'Malay' is equated with 'Muslim' because the Malay ethnicity is recognized as a group that practices Islam and plays a significant role in shaping

the concept of ethnoreligious. This viewpoint implies that the bond between Malays and Islam is so profound that it has been enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution. In Malaysia, Islam is commonly associated with the Malay ethnicity. Therefore, any attempt by Malays to renounce Islam is a serious legal violation in Malaysia, and it is a delicate matter within the Muslim community.

The History of Atheistic Thought in Malaysia

The Portuguese colonization in Malacca in 1511 opened up space for the spread of culture and thought from the West among the Malay community (Chin, 2006). Initially, the Portuguese government established a rule in Malacca by holding gatherings every Sunday in all major cities to commemorate the Crusades between Christians and Muslims (Ahmat, 2006). The Portuguese also built churches in Malaya and priests were stationed in them, receiving financial support. In 1895, the British government consolidated various territories previously under British residents' control into a federation (Anuwar, 2009).

The colonial effect of the Portuguese and British powers can be seen with the inclusion of Christianity in the administrative and educational system. This encompassed the establishment of Christian religious schools and the translation of the Bible into Malay (Gracie, 2016). Many Malay elites received their education in schools established by British colonialists, following the European learning system (Mohamed et al., 2010). The British also introduced the English East India Company, a British trading entity, to dominate Malaya's economy through the management of opium, alcohol, and gambling enterprises (Coleman, 1992).

Western colonization marked the commencement of the colonization of Malay minds, introducing Christianity into Malaya, altering the administrative system from Islamic law to Western law, and establishing businesses that conflicted with Islamic principles. During the migration from China in 1925, the concept of communism was introduced to Malaya by Chinese immigrants (Zulhilmi & Rohani, 2011). This communist ideology was disseminated within the Chinese community in Malaya, resulting in the establishment of the communist movement.

The establishment of the Malayan Communist Party in 1930 brought the ideology of communism, which is an ideology that wants to make the production of consumer goods as a joint property of the state and the people. This understanding also has atheistic thinking that rejects religious beliefs among the Malay community. This ideology, influenced by Karl Marx, includes atheistic beliefs that reject religious faith within the Malay community. Karl Marx famously referred to religion as a form of opium for humanity and dismissed it as an illusion (Fadhilah, 2020). The Malayan Communist Party collaborated with the Young Malay Union (Kesatuan Melayu Muda or KMM) in Malaya, and one of its advisors, Sultan Djenain, was an atheist. Additionally, Mokhatruddin Lasso, the president of KMM, once asserted in a conversation with Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy that God's existence was not evident (Rashidi, 2018).

In 1926, the dissemination of communist ideologies through Chinese-language pamphlets gained prominence in Malaya (Chin, 2006). An alliance was formed between the communists and the British to oust Japanese rule in Malaya in 1941, leading to the Japanese withdrawal

from the region in 1945. Subsequently, Malaya came under communist control for a brief period of 14 days before being handed back to the British, under the British Military Administration (BMA) (Ali, 2002). The communist movement aimed to establish a communist republic in Malaya but failed due to the formation of the Federation of Malaya on February 1, 1948 (Ling, 2010).

While the establishment of a communist republic in Malaya was unsuccessful, a few Malays adopted atheistic beliefs. Some writings, including poetry, exhibited elements of atheism, and certain writers even claimed divinity themselves (Rashidi, 2018). Additionally, a novel titled 'Atheist' was used as a reference in schools, leading a student to assert that Islam was no longer relevant (Abdul Rahman, 1998). Presently, apostate Malays utilize various technological platforms to propagate their beliefs and openly declare their apostasy on social media (Farawahida, 2012).

Based on the history of Western and Communist colonialism in Malaya, it can be seen that they have succeeded in slowly changing the thinking of Muslims in Malaya. Initially, colonialists successfully introduced new beliefs to the Malay society, but over time, Muslims in Malaya were influenced towards atheism, despite its contradiction with Islamic doctrine. The ease of disseminating new ideas in the modern era, compared to limited historical means of information dissemination, has played a significant role in this transformation.

Data Analysis and Research Study

On social media, the anonymity it offers enables individuals to freely express their thoughts and ideologies without revealing their identity publicly (Bunt, 2009; McAlexander et al., 2014). Atheists, especially those residing in Islamic countries, also utilize pseudonyms to discuss their beliefs openly on these platforms. Therefore, an analysis has been conducted on the writings of Malay atheists in Malaysia, with a specific focus on Facebook, as it is the preferred social media platform for this group. The data was gathered from Malay atheist groups on Facebook, including *Warung Atheist*, *Malay Atheist*, *Kubu Batu Itu Berhala*, and individual atheists, known as *Encik Mulhid*. The study's findings reveal three primary issues commonly addressed by Malay atheists.

The first issue pertains to faith, where they reject belief in Allah SWT and deny the existence of Allah SWT. This group views religion as a human creation and challenges the divinity of Allah SWT by presenting scientific arguments and interpreting Quranic verses according to their own perspectives, without consulting experts. Consequently, this approach leads to a misunderstanding of monotheism and religious creed. Some of the statements found in their Facebook writings include

"Let me show you this concept of God does is completely illogical. Let say God does exist, please tell me among the many Gods there are, which God is the most true and worthy of worship? Please give the most thoughtful answer" (Demang Hafiz, 2022).

Based on this quote, the request is made to reveal the God that requires worship, given the multitude of religions in the world. All adherents of different religions assert the superiority of their faith over others. In his view, the concept of divinity is deemed unacceptable due to the sheer diversity of religions and deities worldwide. Furthermore, it is posited in other

writings that, according to the principles of Physics, God was originally conceived as energy. This implies that all entities consist of energy vibrating at specific frequencies. For instance, while a physical object like a book may seem solid and compact, closer examination reveals that it is composed of interconnected molecules, and a more in-depth inspection reveals the arrangement of atoms within those molecules.

A similar phenomenon is observed in the creation of the universe, which originates from energy. The true nature of this occurrence can only be discerned through scientific inquiry, challenging the human tendency to perceive this energy, described as God, as possessing immense power deserving of worship and adoration. This underscores that the deity worshiped by humans is an energy inherent in natural phenomena, a query answerable solely through scientific means rather than religious teachings (El Ghazali, 2022).

On the other hand, Tuan Minal presents arguments for the existence of God using the mantic (logical) method, employing a deductive reasoning approach with two premises. The first premise posits that "this world is new," while the second premise asserts that something new must have a creator. Thus, it concludes that this world requires a Creator, namely Allah SWT, substantiating the existence of God (Abidin, 1890). Logically speaking, can the universe emerge spontaneously? Is it rational for something to materialize without a cause? Mathematically, $0 + 0$ equals 0 , not 1 or 2 . Anything born from nothingness necessitates a cause-and-effect relationship leading to its inception. If something exists, it implies that it did not exist naturally before.

The second issue frequently raised by Malay atheists on Facebook centers on the rejection of the Quran. Malay atheists contend that the Quran has lost its relevance in contemporary society, deeming it a historical legal document created by religious authorities to exert control over people (Jalal, 2021). Among the assertions challenging the Quran's sanctity is a statement by Alizah in 2018

"Why does Allah not preserve books before the Quran like the Bible if he really hopes that people can understand His instructions and not get confused. By leaving many books on the face of this earth, which are distorted and which are not distorted, it adds to the confusion".

According to the author, several holy books or scriptures were revealed to previous Messengers before the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad PBUH. However, these books have undergone modifications in their content. The author raises questions about the abundance of these books and their relevance for people to follow.

Scrutinizing the content found in the Qur'an, there are scientific discoveries that bring people closer to God, not farther away. If the Quran were outdated, why do we see numerous scientific findings today that align with Quranic verses? The expansion of the universe, as explained by Einstein, is a mysterious phenomenon driven by a force called dark energy. Around 5 billion years ago, this enigmatic anti-gravity force started pushing the universe outward once more. The Quran accurately describes this phenomenon in one of its verses.

وَالسَّمَاءَ بَنَيْنَاهَا بِأَيْدٍ وَإِنَّا لَمُوسِعُونَ

“We built the universe with great might, and We are certainly expanding it” (Adh-Dhariyat, 51:47).

This verse explains to humans that the universe has expanded. ‘*La-mūsi‘ūna*’ is an Arabic phrase that tells people that the universe will continue to expand. Additionally, the Quran has detailed the creation of humans in a manner consistent with scientific explanations, particularly in relation to development within the womb. Allah (S.W.T.) mentioned

مَا لَكُمْ لَا تَرْجُونَ لِلَّهِ وَقَارًا / وَقَدْ خَلَقَكُمْ أَطْوَارًا

“What is the matter with you that you are not in awe of the Majesty of Allah, when He truly created you in stages of development?” (Surah Nuh, 71: 13-14)

This verse explanation explains that humans undergo diverse developmental stages, assuming various forms and conditions, (*atwāran*) starting from semen before becoming a fetus. commencing from semen and progressing to the fetal stage. The Quran, predating Darwin's birth, parallels his theory of human development in the womb, affirming the timeless relevance and unaltered accuracy of its content (Danial, 2014).

Fasting is the third subject addressed by atheists, contending that it detrimentally impacts the health of fasting Muslims. Additionally, Muslims are coerced into fasting, under the threat of adverse consequences such as sin for abstaining. Furthermore, fasting compels impoverished Muslims to contribute zakat, a mandated practice during Ramadan. This perspective is echoed on Facebook

“Fasting cannot feel the plight of the poor. Fasting does not provide lessons that align with the suffering of the poor, but rather adds to the suffering of the poor who are forced to fast as a Muslim. For example, many Muslims are wasteful when breaking their fast and are forced to pay zakat, even the poor - as a Muslim's duty (Zen Firidy, 2018)”.

“The teaching of fasting is an illogical practice of worship and causes diseases such as low sugar levels in the body which will cause spasms in the human body. Therefore, fasting will lead to brain death because oxygen does not reach it (Kassim, 2018)”.

In the jurisprudence of fasting there are conditions for Muslims to fast and also relief for Muslims who are unable to fast. This matter has been explained in the Qur'anic verse of surah al-Baqarah, verse 184

أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَاتٍ فَمَنْ كَانَ مِنْكُمْ مَّرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ...

“Fast a prescribed number of days. But whoever of you is ill or on a journey, then let them fast an equal number of days after Ramadan...”

Based on this verse, it shows that Islam is a religion that is easy to practice, including the obligation of fasting. In fact, there are provisions for certain groups exempted from this religious obligation. These exempted groups include individuals who are traveling in accordance with the conditions of their journey and those who are ill and unable to fast. If a person is unwell, and fasting would worsen their condition, it is permissible not to fast. Such individuals are required to provide *fidyah*, a form of compensation, by providing meals to the needy (Syihabudin, 2015). This clarification underscores Islam's concern for the impoverished and counters the claims of atheists that fasting adversely affects the poor. In reality, the *fidyah* payments are directed towards the *asnaf* and the impoverished.

Similarly, the payment of zakat during the month of Ramadan is often criticized for burdening the poor. Al-Qardawi (1987) explained it as a specific portion of wealth that Allah (S.W.T.) obliges to be distributed to those with rightful claims. This designated amount, extracted from one's total wealth, is termed zakat, as the amount set aside will subsequently multiply, carrying greater significance, and safeguarding wealth from decay. Al-Qardawi's explanation clarifies that zakat is a duty imposed on every Muslim, to be allocated to zakat recipients including the *asnaf* and the poor. Zakat assists the impoverished in sustaining their lives and acquiring necessities during Ramadan and festive periods. This perspective refutes the notion that Ramadan unfairly burdens the poor and instead, benefits them through zakat and *fidyah* contributions.

From a scientific perspective, fasting offers health advantages. Various contemporary studies on fasting conducted by both Muslims and non-Muslims were presented at the 1994 International Congress in Casablanca. These studies revealed the positive physiological and psychological effects of fasting during Ramadan. Physiologically, fasting results in lowered blood sugar, cholesterol levels, and systolic blood pressure. Psychologically, fasting contributes to mental tranquility and composure, with links to stable blood sugar levels.

Alan Cott (2003) conducted research demonstrating that fasting can enhance a person's intelligence. This was observed through tests conducted on both fasting and non-fasting groups, with the fasting group achieving higher scores. Additionally, the digestive processes of the fasting group exhibited improved efficiency compared to the non-fasting group. This scientific study refutes the claims by atheists that fasting is detrimental to health, such as causing oxygen deprivation. It is evident that fasting can have a positive impact on human health.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that the arguments presented run counter to rational thought, given that science acknowledges its limitations in unraveling all phenomena. The Quran's mention of certain facts predates scientific discoveries, such as the creation of humanity, and it was revealed to an illiterate individual in a remote desert, far removed from civilization. Studies have also indicated positive effects of religious practices on both external and internal health. Additionally, Malay atheists have been challenging the country's constitution, which designates Malays as followers of Islam. The positions espoused by this group suggest a void in their faith as they reject the fundamental concept of belief in Allah SWT. The writings of Malay atheists further demonstrate that their discourse on social media is primarily driven by emotions in their rejection of Islam as an immaculate and

comprehensive religion. This group also demands empirical proof of God's existence through scientific investigations, asserting that all entities in the world must be observable and tangible. This underscores the significance of mantic and kalam knowledge in countering the arguments presented by the atheist faction within the Muslim community. The counterarguments are grounded in rationality, aligning with the guidance of revelation to address all contentions raised by the Malay atheist group, as they are disinclined to accept solely revealed textual arguments.

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