

## **BELIEF ON THE PURPOSE OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO QURANIC PERSPECTIVE AMONGST MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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### **Abstract**

Islam teaches its adherents to practice the noblest forms of ethics and morality called *Akhlak*. *Akhlak* or Islamic ethics and morality provide peace in human life, whether to an individual or the community, and portray the image of Islam as a religion of mercy for all. However, in the context of UiTM students where Malay Muslims are the majority, the rise in problems related to unethical behaviours among them poses an important question, what do the Malay Muslims in Malaysia understand about being a Muslim? What are their beliefs about the purpose of professing the Islamic faith? By taking a group of UiTM students who are largely composed of Malay Muslims, this study analyses their level of belief regarding the purpose of religion. A total of 1313 students from all UiTM branches in Peninsular Malaysia were selected as respondents through the group strata sampling technique. Data from the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS (Version 12.0). Frequencies, percentages and means were reported for each sub-construct. The study concludes that students' belief about the purpose of religion are still tied to aspects of cultural, ritual and customs. Hence, the inculcation of students' belief in religion should be reinforced by the understanding of the basic essentials of Islam and the Unity of God (Tawhid) so that students recognise and acknowledges with certainty that the purpose of religion is to accomplish the goal of creation and to realise the original covenant entered with Allah SWT in the day of *alastu*. Belief in the purpose of religion should be linked to the goals of creation and to the covenant made.

**Keywords:** Religion, *Tawhid*, Islam, *Din*, Student

## Introduction

Through an elaboration and understanding of the real meaning of religion as encapsulated in the term *Din*, a Muslim can acquire knowledge of the true meaning of Islam. A comprehensive understanding of the concept and reality of Islam as *Al-Din* also produces real conviction about the true purpose of religion<sup>130</sup>. With that conviction, the question, “Why I profess the religion of Islam” can be answered well and with certainty. In other words, being convinced about the religion and its purpose guides Muslims to possess clear faith (*iman*) and prevents them from influences of other beliefs not in lined with Islam, be it religious or otherwise. Generally, the entire concept of the purpose of religion being discussed in this article is based upon the event of the covenant (*al-mithaq*) between the human soul and Allah SWT. The event is the starting point for all human responsibilities in the world, both as servants (*‘abd*) and as vicegerents.

### The covenant (al-mithaq) as the foundation of the purpose of religion

According to the Islamic worldview described by Al-Attas<sup>131</sup> the purpose of religion should be based on the bond of the covenant between man and Allah SWT as enshrined in Surah Al-A’raf verse 172 that is,

“When your Lord drew forth the son of Adam from their loins their descendants and made them testify concerning themselves by saying: “Am I not your Lord? So they said: “Yes! We do testify!” (Surah Al-A’raf: 172).

Based on the first word in the ayat which is “*Alastu*”, some scholars called the covenant as the day of *alastu*. Conviction in the covenant brings man to an important awareness in understanding why and how a person is religious in the true sense. The question of the purpose of religion is answered through one’s realisation of his/her true identity and reality as man (*insan*) and as a person a real sense of indebtedness of our existence; from one who has made a promise with Allah SWT. The question of how religion is practised is answered by performing the acts of worship as prescribed by Allah SWT in the Quran and Sunnah<sup>132</sup>. Without this belief and understanding, Muslims tend to practise Islam in the context of culture and mere customs inherited from generation to generation by previous ancestors, without associating themselves with Allah SWT. In addition, an understanding of this covenant creates an awareness that religion is not merely a construct based on law and nationhood, but it is a spiritual covenant with God. Thus, the event of the covenant is a personal reflection of the spiritual self as the reality or essential quality of man.<sup>133</sup>

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130 Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. (2013). *Islam: Fahaman Agama Dan Asas Akhlak*. Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM.

131 Ibid.

132 Malik Badri. (2000). *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study*. Kuala Lumpur: Medeeana Books.

133 Mohd. Farid Mohd. Shahrani. (2012). *Mithaq Sebagai Landasan Agama Dan Akhlak Dlm. Adab Dan Peradaban: Karya Pengiktirafan Untuk Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas*. Petaling Jaya: MPH Group Publishing, 115-132.

Having certainty towards the reality and truth of this day (of the covenant) serves as a reminder for people to worship and live according to the teachings of the religion in the form of conscious submission and obedience that is done willingly and voluntarily. Self-awareness to perform acts of obedience to Allah SWT willingly is a form of freedom for man as he returns to his original state without being bound by any other element that restricts his nature. In this case, Al-Attas<sup>134</sup> describes this situation as "... the act that liberates him from the shackles of animal or carnal soul (*nafs haywaniyyah*) and the prison of this transitory world, and brings him back to the true identification of himself which has always affirmed the Right of Allah Most High.(translated)".

The event of this covenant also illustrates that the whole person has acknowledged and accepted Allah SWT as his Rab or Lord. Indirectly, man at that time has been given knowledge of Allah SWT, the One worthy to be recognised as God. Man has also been given knowledge of the nature of the self that always in need of Allah SWT. Hence, the form of acknowledgement and surrender which is pledged by the soul of man takes place in an atmosphere of acceptance without compulsion from Allah SWT, though Allah Almighty is *Al-Jabbar*, the Most Powerful and Most Mighty.<sup>135</sup>

If the acknowledgement of Islam is not based on this covenant, it would result in some implications. First of all, man will assume that every religious instruction is a rule imposed on him and that no one has any choice but to obey it. The act of fulfilling religious commandments, such as the prayer is performed on the basis of merely fulfilling God's instructions. Thus, the performance of the prayer will eventually become a mere ritual performed without achieving the main purpose of worship. The purpose and meaning of the prayer is to bring about the predisposition of aservant in the person. The nature of servitude is the spirit of external forms of worship prescribed by Islam<sup>136</sup>.

However, by understanding the nature of man at the time of the event of the covenant, he would understand that the performance of acts of worship is not merely to attain paradise and fearing hell. On the contrary, the fulfillment of every act of worship instructed by Allah SWT is understood as a symbol of Allah SWT's love for man, so that man attains his natural predisposition (*fitrah*), i.e. submits to Allah SWT as his Lord willingly and voluntarily.<sup>137</sup> In addition, belief in this covenant motivates man to always strive to draw closer to God because his soul once had enjoyed the knowledge of Allah SWT. Although in this life, the soul is at times weak and loses out to the desires of the physical self, a person who understands the nature of the self during the time of the covenant will not give up easily in order to attain the self's natural state. He will give priority to the practice of purifying his soul, i.e. through

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134 Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. (2013). *Islam: Faham Agama Dan Asas Akhlak*. Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 23.

135 Haron Din. (1990). *Manusia Dan Islam*. Bangi: PKENJ.

136 Hassan Langgulung. (2001). *Islamisasi Pendidikan Dari Perspektif Metodologi*. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*. 9 (3). 17-32.

137 Sa'id Hawwa. (2011). *Ulasan Kata-kata Hikmah Syeikh Ibn Ata'illah al-Sakandari (al- Hikam)*. Terj. Basri bin Ibrahim. Johor: Pertiagaan Jahabersa.

repentance, sincerity, contemplation, remembrance of God, patience, acceptance, gratitude and other good morals to achieve the state of *mutmainnah* or tranquility.<sup>138</sup>

The event of the covenant also acts as the beginning of brotherhood with other human beings. The encounter of our souls in the day of the covenant together acknowledged the same fact, namely that of God's divinity and the self as servant shows that there is a harmonious bond with his God and with other fellow men. Hence, the embracement of religion in the context of this world must also involve man's ethical and moral behaviour when dealing with his fellow brothers. In fact, the Quran and Hadith also organise and teach man about ethics and morality among men. Furthermore, the outward character of man with other human beings is also based on the understanding that man in the side of Allah in the covenant, is on the same level as a servant who is owned, governed and guided by a single Power who has the authority to dispose<sup>139</sup>.

In short, the purpose of religion in Islam is to (i) fulfill the purpose of creation as servant and vicegerent (*khalifah*) of Allah, (ii) return to the original covenant which acknowledged God's divine nature, (iii) fulfill the natural predisposition of the self (the soul) who recognises and obeys God, (iv) forge brotherhood with fellow believers through divine connection, (v) act as a symbol of gratitude, submission and obedience to Allah SWT, the Most Gracious, the Merciful. All these religious purposes can be attained by man who is aware of the state of his existence which is entirely dependent on Allah SWT's mercy and earnestly practising the teachings as required by Allah SWT. Hence, belief in religion requires a conscience elements based on knowledge to fulfil religious commandments in the way dictated by Allah SWT.

### Research methodology

This study is a survey conducted on 1313 final year diploma students to identify the level of their belief in religion according to Islam. Final year diploma students were selected as they had undergone the compulsory courses of Islamic Education in the first three semester. Indirectly, the findings will indicate the level of their understanding of the courses and also their thoughts on how to integrate Islamic principle in their lives. The sampling technique used is the multistage cluster sampling. The cluster sampling technique is the best technique<sup>140</sup> for collecting large-sized data. The technique of strata sampling is to take into account the non-homogeneous sample features by ensuring that the various sample categories represent the actual population of this study<sup>141</sup> which is scattered in large areas.

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138 Norsaleha Mohd. Salleh. (2015). Penghayatan Akidah, Ketenangan Hati Dan Ketenangan Rohani Dalam Kalangan Pelajar Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Di Malaysia. Tesis Doktor Falsafah. Fakulti Pendidikan Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

139 Abdul Salam Yussof. (2010). Effective Education Ideas Of Al-Ghazali And Confucious. Bangi: Penerbit UKM.

140 Creswell, J. W. & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). Designing And Conducting Mixed Methods Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

141 Azizi Yahaya, Shahrin Hashim, Jamaludin Ramli, Yusof Boon & Abdul Rahim Hamdan. (2007). Menguasai Penyelidikan Dalam Pendidikan. Kuala Lumpur: PTS Publication.

This study uses the questionnaire as the main instrument. All these items use the Likert scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) somewhat agree, (4) agree and (5) strongly agree. To ensure content validity, a total of 13 appraisers were appointed to assess and recommend improvements to the instrument and the set of questions constructed. For the first stage of data analysis, the investigators conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). This test is to determine construct validity in addition to ensuring that the items grouped under a construct actually represent the construct. This approach is also to identify items that have similar answers based on the responses of all respondents. EFA<sup>142</sup> is one of the methods to assess the level of construct validity. Having found the value of communality within the accepted range, a descriptive analysis is then performed. Next, the data processed through descriptive statistics through SPSS software and important results are presented in tables and graphs.

### Findings

A person's belief in the purpose of religion can guide his attitudes and behaviours in practicing the religion. The table below shows mean scores and standard deviations of belief in religious purpose.

Table Mean scores and standard deviations for belief about the purpose of religion

CODE	Item	Frequency Percentage					Mean	SD
		SDA	DA	SWA	A	SA		
	Belief on purpose and meaning of religion							
KTB 2	Islamic teachings provide peace to the soul		12 (0.91)	30 (2.28)	220 (16.76)	1051 (80.05)	4.76	0.53
KTB 6	Obedience to Islamic teachings is a way of acknowledging Allah SWT's power	3 (0.23)	1 (0.08)	30 (2.28)	265 (20.18)	1014 (77.23)	4.74	0.52
KTB 8	Islamic teachings are for man's wellbeing	1 (0.08)	2 (0.15)	25 (1.90)	287 (21.86)	998 (76.01)	4.74	0.50
KTB 7	Islamic teachings are suitable with human nature	1 (0.10)	3 (0.20)	36 (2.74)	268 (20.41)	1005 (76.54)	4.73	0.52
KTB 2	Obedience to Islamic teachings is a way to show gratitude to Allah SWT		1 (0.08)	43 (3.27)	265 (20.18)	1004 (76.47)	4.73	0.52
KTB 3	Islamic teachings answer the purpose of human existence	2 (0.15)	7 (0.53)	35 (2.67)	259 (19.73)	1010 (76.92)	4.73	0.55

142 Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, And Evaluating Quantitative And Qualitative Research*. Edisi ke-2. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.

KTB4	Islam is the true way of worshipping God	2 (0.15)	5 (0.38)	46 (3.50)	246 (18.74)	1014 (77.23)	4.73	0.56
KTB9	Islamic teachings control the evils of desires	19 (1.450)	27 (2.060)	142 (10.81)	281 (21.4)	844 (64.28)	4.67	0.60
KTB1	The purpose of religion is to affirm that Allah SWT is the One True God	5 (0.38)	26 (1.98)	71 (5.41)	313 (23.84)	898 (68.39)	4.58	0.72
KTB10	The covenant to affirm Allah SWT's Oneness took place in the spirit world	4	6	49	304	950	4.45	0.87

N=1313

Generally, the students received a high mean score for the sub-construct of 'purpose of religion' of 4.68 with a standard deviation of 0.43. The highest score is the KBT2 item, "Islamic teaching gives peace to the soul" (mean = 4.76, s.d. = 0.53). A total of 1051 people (80.05%) answered on the 'strongly agree' scale, 220 people (16.76%) answered on the 'agree' scale, 30 people (2.28%) answered on the 'somewhat agree' scale and 12 people (0.91%) answered on the 'disagree' scale. The next item is KBT8, "Islamic teachings are for man's wellbeing" (mean = 4.74, s.d. = 0.50). For this item, a total of 998 people (76.01%) responded on the 'strongly agree' scale, 287 people (21.86%) responded on the 'agree' scale, 25 people (1.9%) responded 'somewhat agree', 2 people (0.15%) responded on the 'disagree' scale, and 1 person (0.08%) responded on the 'strongly disagree' scale. The KTB6 item, "Obedience to the teachings of Islam is a way of acknowledging the power of Allah SWT" (mean = 4.74, s.d. = 0.52), as many as 1014 people (77.23%) answered on the 'strongly agree' scale, 265 (20.18%) answered on the 'agree' scale, 30 people (2.289%) answered on the 'somewhat agree' scale, 1 person (0.08%) responded on the 'disagree' scale and 3 (0.23%) answered on the 'strongly disagree' scale. Furthermore, the KTB7 item "Islamic teachings are suitable with human nature" (mean = 4.73, s.d. = 0.52) recorded 1005 people (76.54%) answered on the 'strongly agree' scale, 268 (20.41%) answered on the 'agree' scale, 36 people (2.74%) answered on the 'somewhat agree' scale, 3 people (0.2%) answered on the 'disagree' scale and 1 person (0.10%) answered on the 'strongly disagree' scale. For the KTB3 item, "Islam answers the question of the purpose of human existence" (mean = 4.73, s.d. = 0.55), 1010 people (76.92%) replied on the 'strongly agree' scale, 259 people (19.73%) replied on the 'agree' scale, 35 people (2.67%) answered on the 'somewhat agreed' scale, 7 people (0.53%) answered on the 'disagree' scale and 2 people (0.15%) responded on the 'strongly disagree' scale.

Next is the KTB4 item, "Islam is the true way of worshipping God" (mean = 4.73, s.d. = 0.56). It shows that 1014 people (77.23%) answered on the 'strongly agree' scale, 246

people (18.74%) answered on the 'agree' scale, 46 people (3.5%) answered on the 'somewhat agree' scale, 5 people (0.38%) replied on the 'disagree' scale and 2 people (0.15%) responded on the 'strongly disagree' scale. The KTB9 item, "Islamic teaching controls the evils of desires", achieved a mean score of 4.67 with a standard deviation of 0.60. A total of 844 people (64.28%) answered on the scale of 'strongly agree', 281 people (21.40%) answered on the scale of 'agree', 142 people (10.81%) answered on the scale of 'somewhat agree', 27 people (2.06%) answered on the scale of 'disagree' and 19 people (1.45%) answered on the scale of 'strongly disagree'.

The item which obtained the second lowest mean score is KTB1 which is "The purpose of professing a religion is to affirm Allah SWT as the One true God" (mean = 4.58, s.d. = 0.72). A total of 898 respondents (68.37%) responded on the scale of 'strongly agree', 313 people (23.84%) replied on the scale of 'agree', 71 people (5.41%) responded on the scale of 'somewhat agree', 26 people (1.98%) responded on the 'disagree' scale and 5 people (0.38%) responded on the scale of 'strongly disagree'. Next, the item which obtained the lowest mean score is KTB10 which is "The covenant to affirm Allah SWT's Oneness took place in the spirit world" (mean = 4.45, s.d. = 0.87). For this item, a total of 950 respondents (72.35%) answered on the scale of 'strongly agree', 304 people (23.15%) answered on the scale of 'agree', 49 people (3.73%) answered on the scale of 'somewhat agree', 6 people (0.46%) answered on the scale of 'disagree' and 4 people (0.3%) responded on the scale of 'strongly disagree'.

## Discussion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be seen that the students' understanding with regard to the importance of *Tawhid* as the means of realizing the purpose of religion is unclear. This is seen based on the low mean scores of items related to *Tawhid*. Instead, the majority of students are more aware of the purpose of religion as a manifestation of obedience and gratitude and to receive rewards from Allah SWT. The findings also show that students are less able to relate the purpose of religion with *Tawhid* as part of their natural inclination. Based on the results of the analysis of the means, students are found to be less knowledgeable about the covenant in which man had entered into. This can be detected based on the lowest mean score recorded on items related to the covenant to affirm Allah SWT's Oneness that took place in the spirit world. Hence, it is arguable that students lack knowledge of the nature and the predisposition of man. Students' lack in understanding and believing in this matter may be due to their deficiency of practice in referring to the source of knowledge especially those coming from revelation and insufficient readings on Islam. In this regard, conviction among the students in the nature of man should be further reinforced<sup>143</sup> and affirming Allah SWT's Oneness which is a characteristic or natural inclination<sup>144</sup> possessed

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143 Mohd. Fauzi Hamat & Mohd. Khairul Naim Che Nordin. (2012). *Akidah Dan Pembangunan Modal Insan*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit UM.

144 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. (1993). *A Young Muslim's Guide To The Modern World*. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society.

by all human beings<sup>145</sup>. With such conviction, commitment to Islam is stronger because it is driven by internal factors as opposed to coercion coming from cultural authorities such as parents or teachers as a factor or purpose in the teaching of the religion.

In addition to seeing the variations of students' belief in the purpose of religion, the findings of this study indirectly highlight the issue of the effectiveness of teaching of Aqidah at the school and diploma levels. The fact that the percentage of those who responded 'disagree' is quite significant in almost all items gives an indicator that the teaching of the Aqidah, in particular, the teaching methods<sup>146</sup> practised by teachers has not been able to be resolved<sup>147</sup>. Based on the findings of this study, it must be noted that an emphasis should be made on inculcating total conviction in the students of Allah SWT's existence, as well as of His Mercy and Power, rather than simply repeating and imparting knowledge of secondary school level without any added value.

The views of some previous researchers may be associated with the issue being discussed. They pointed out that Islamic education in Malaysia is too concerned with the question of Fiqh or Islamic Jurisprudence over inculcating conviction in the issue of Aqidah (principles of belief) and Iman (belief with knowledge and conviction<sup>148</sup>). In lessons regarding acts of worship, it is found that it is less focused on inculcating conviction in Allah SWT<sup>149</sup>. In fact, in the teaching of Quranic verses, students are urged to memorise the verses and recite them fluently, but the teacher does not discuss the meaning and lessons contained in the verses so that students' conviction can be strengthened. As a result, students may know and understand the teachings of Islam well but lack understanding in the wisdom and the purpose of religion. Therefore, the appreciation of Islam in real life cannot be fully realised.

## Conclusion

In summary, the findings of this study show that belief in the purpose of religion must be strengthened so that students can appreciate that Islam is a religion that gives grace to an individual's happiness as well as to the collectives. Inculcating Islamic values in adults should be based on knowledge and conviction, and should no longer be based on rituals and customs in religion. Therefore, serious attention to the event of the covenant that took place with Allah SWT as a starting point for the existence and responsibilities of man in this world can provide a firm basis for religion and the priority of affirming Allah SWT as the One worthy of worship in life.

145 Yasien Mohamed. (2000). Human Natural Disposition. *Muslim Education Quarterly*. 17(2):55-60.

146 Ab. Halim Tamuri, Adnan Yusopp, Kamisah Osman, Shahrin Awaluddin, Zamri Abd. Rahim & Khadijah Abd. Razak. (2004). *The Effectiveness Of Teaching And Learning In Islamic Education On The Development Of Students*. Research Report. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

147 Mohd. Aliff Mohd. Nawi, Ezad Azraai Jamsari, Mohd. Isa Hamzah, Adibah Sulaiman, & Azizi Umar. (2012). *The Impact Of Globalization On Current Islamic Education*. *Australian Journal Of Basic And Applied Sciences* 6(8): 74-78.

148 Rosnani Hashim, Suhailah Hussein, & Adesile M. Imran. (2014). Hikmah (wisdom) Pedagogy And Students' Thinking And Reasoning Abilities. *Intellectual Discourse*, 22(2), 119-138.

149 Asmawati Suhid & Fathiyah Mohd. Fakhruddin. (2012). Gagasan Pemikiran Falsafah Dalam Pendidikan Islam : Hala Tuju Dan Cabaran. *Journal Of Islamic And Arabic Education*. 4(2): 57-70.

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